

Social Current Public Policy Toolkit:

Media Relations and
Social Media

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MEDIA RELATIONS FOR ADVOCACY

WHY ENGAGING WITH MEDIA IS IMPORTANT

The media can be a valuable tool to use to deliver your key messages to specific audiences; however, what you say, and how you say it, can have a significant impact on whether the media covers it and how they present your message to the public. Often the most difficult part of gaining the media's attention is developing a story angle that is both newsworthy and informative to media's specific audiences.

Media responds strongly to personal stories. Whenever possible, it is recommended that you engage media by sharing with them stories about how these policies will impact different segments of the population through real-life case studies and personal testimonials. Statistics and data are important as well, however; when you weave them into personal stories, it provides a broader context while engaging your audience at a more emotional level.

PROACTIVELY ENGAGING MEDIA

While it is certainly critical that communications staff react appropriately to media requests, it is equally important to engage in proactive media outreach as well.

A proactive approach involves consistent personal outreach to reporters and editors. It involves casual conversations, drop-in chats, invitations to key policy and media events, and other efforts to help news people understand what the policies you are introducing are about and why they are important. With that foundation, you then will have a much greater likelihood of positive response when you try to interest an editor or reporter in a story about your specific issue or policy.

If you are not communicating proactively, the general public may not be getting the information they need to be adequately engaged on important issues. The media is one of the key avenues through which policy is influenced. It is essential that staff use it as a tool to communicate and advocate for their policy stances in order to activate citizens to support those policies to their local legislators. Take control of your story. Tell it clearly and consistently. If you don't, other people will, and the story they create may not be the one you want.

CREATING STORY ANGLES AND OUTREACH IDEAS

It's important to have a proactive media outreach strategy with preparation and forethought as to how you want to present your issue and how you want it to be covered. Write the story you want to see published in advance. Below are a few questions you should ask yourself before reaching out to a reporter.

- Is your story timely? Does your story include something the reporter can tie to current news or an upcoming event? For example, the president announcing the new budget, new jobs figures released, a compelling personal story about someone positively impacted by a new policy, etc.
- Will targeted audiences consider the information important or useful?
- Is there anything unique or unusual about the information?
- Are there any interesting personal stories, facts, or data that can be included?

USING DATE HOOKS TO CREATE STORY ANGLES

Throughout the year, awareness days, weeks, and months provide additional opportunities to engage with policymakers, the media, and community stakeholders. This annual calendar offers year-round opportunities to share information. The following highlights key annual observances that may correspond to your work.

MONTH	OBSERVANCE
January	National Mentoring Month
March	National Professional Social Work Month
April	National Public Health Week
	National Volunteer Week
	National Child Abuse Prevention Awareness Month
	Counseling Awareness Month
	National Minority Health Month
	National Financial Literacy Month
May	Mental Health Month
	National Foster Care Month
	Older Americans Month
June	Children’s Awareness Month
July	Purposeful Parenting Month
September	Citizenship Day and Constitution Week
	National Alcohol and Drug Addiction Recovery Month
October	Child Health Day (first Monday in October)
	National Depression & Mental Health Screening Month
	National Domestic Violence Awareness Month
	Giving Tuesday (Tuesday after Thanksgiving)
	Military Family Month
	National Adoption Month
December	Human Rights Day (Dec 10)

RESPONDING TO MEDIA INQUIRIES

This section provides advice on responding to media calls and requests and/or preparing for and conducting an interview. You will need to clarify with your senior leadership who has authorization to speak with the media on behalf of your organization.

Preparing for an Interview

- **Gather as much information as possible from the reporter:** Understand who is calling and why. Identify the reporter and his/her affiliation. If possible, determine the reporter's audience including size, geographic location, ages, occupations, and interests. Establish the focus of the story. Find out the reporter's deadline. Find out who else will be interviewed for the story. Ask how the reporter was referred to you. For television or radio interviews, find out if the interview will be live, taped, or "live to tape" (meaning it's a live interview that is aired later.) For radio, ask if there will be listener call-in. This information will help you not get caught unaware by a caller you weren't expecting during the interview.
- **Collect and organize your thoughts:** You do not have to talk to the reporter immediately. The reporter has had time to prepare, so you should grant yourself the same opportunity. It is important; however, to respect a reporter's deadline. If you are being interviewed about an issue related to Social Current's public policy agenda, remember you can use us as a resource.
- **Use your preparation time to do the following:** Read through the tips and suggestions that follow in this toolkit. Prepare for likely questions. Outline two or three key points you want to make. Think about your visual appearance (in the event of a television interview). (Clothes that are blue or red appear well on television but avoid white because it can be too bright for television cameras and avoid patterns that can distort on camera.) If you are in a situation that does not allow you to fully prepare, then in a friendly manner ask the reporter for the following: The nature of the story he/she is working on, specific questions she would like addressed, and the deadline, in case you would like to provide supporting information after the interview.

During the Interview

- **Emphasize personal stories:** The impact of a proposed policy is often best illustrated in the many personal stories of people who have been or will be touched by it. Media like to tell a story through real-life case histories and examples. Think about how best to weave personal stories into the interview. Statistical information can also help illustrate the impact of your policy on the state or country.
- **Be consistent:** All responses to media inquiries should be consistent. To ensure consistency, share background information with other individuals who might be speaking with the media, such as other spokespersons from the network who may be approached by the same reporter.
- **Technique:** The key here is to be honest, sincere, and confident. If you do not know the answer to a reporter's questions, then say so. If you can find out, do so and follow up.
- **Avoid speculation:** Do not be speculative or answer hypothetical questions. If a reporter leads with, "Assume that..." or "What if...", respond with something such as, "I am unable to speculate on that, however..." and state your positive message.
- **Remain positive:** Convey positive messages and responses. Positive remarks are the best. For example, if a negative question is posed, don't say, "No, our proposed initiative is not intended to ...". Instead say what it is intended to do.
- **Avoid saying, "no comment":** It sounds as if you have something to hide. If you do not have an answer, say so and let the reporter know that you, or the appropriate spokesperson, will get back to them with information. If you do not want to discuss something, rephrase the general message, or refer to your key messages on the topic; you don't have to answer specifics. Be firm, but not abrasive.
- **Keep it simple:** Technical terms may be foreign to a reporter, particularly feature reporters. If a reporter fully understands you, he is more likely to incorporate your response in the story.

- **Be concise:** State your answer and stop. Do not fill in silent pauses. Often a reporter will ask a question, wait for your response, and then be silent, waiting for you to elaborate. If a reporter seems to use this technique, provide your answer, stop, and ask the reporter if there are any other questions. A pause also provides you with the opportunity to add your two or three key points or collect your thoughts.
- **Press contacts:** Keep a record of press contacts. This will help you remember which reporters are fair and balanced and should be called upon when you have something to say.
- **Television interviews:** Often television coverage will only air your response, so it is best to restate the question at the beginning of your answer—e.g., If a reporter asks, “How many people will be impacted by this new policy?” Respond with, “This new policy will affect more than two-thirds of the population.” Just answering with a number will be meaningless for viewers who don’t hear the initial question and will lessen the chance that your response gets on the air.

and make sure they are trained in what to say and how to say it. Learn the names and roles of key people at local and regional news organizations with which you want to connect.

- **What:** This is your message (or messages), and “what” you do to deliver them. Determine what messages carry the greatest interest for the media and most potential benefit for communicating your policies. Remember, what people write or say about your policies may track back to what sorts of programs and events you create to attract the spotlight. Determine what tactics make the most sense, maybe a news release, a press conference, or a public speech.
- **When:** To keep the media’s interest, keep talking with them. Develop a regular schedule of news releases, meetings with reporters and editors, and events that engage the public and attract reporters.
- **Where:** Think about “where” you want your message to appear. Is the local paper or radio station the best outlet? Might it deserve wider coverage? Or is it something that would best be delivered in a speech or through a press event or social media? These days, one approach does not fit all needs. Develop a list of media contacts and tactics that cover the range of possible needs.
- **Why:** It’s important to know why you are engaging the media. A communications plan should support organizational goals, whether it is getting legislation passed, communicating new policies or advocating on behalf of key constituencies. If you know why you are communicating, you will have a clearer idea about tactics.

DEVELOPING A COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIA STRATEGY

Like anything else, effective media relations depend on planning. If you don’t think about your story and how you want to tell it, you will forfeit a golden opportunity to advance your mission. Developing a media relations strategy doesn’t need to be time-consuming or complex. Determine who your target audience is and develop simple key messages that effectively demonstrate your policy goals and accomplishments. Keep it simple, but remember these key ingredients to a communications plan that any good news story or news release would cover:

- **Who:** Define whom you serve, how you serve them, and who will tell that story. Someone should be in charge of preparing an annual media plan and tracking it to completion. Identify spokespersons,

MEDIA “DOS” AND “DON'TS”

The following “dos” and “don'ts” provide key tips for making your voice heard, talking about your issue, speaking with reporters, spinning your message and other basics tactics.

- **Do be aware of a reporter's deadline:** Today's 24/7 news cycle means that deadline hours vary. Educate yourself about reporters' deadlines.
- **Do pay attention to the news and what's happening elsewhere related to your issue:** If something big is happening in the news that connects to your issue, make yourself available at deadline time and you may get into the story. For example, if an article appears about unemployment trends, that might be an opportunity to get a follow-up piece on the impact of a new jobs bill you are trying to promote.
- **Do translate numbers into concepts that are easy to grasp:** For example, instead of saying, “Seventy-five percent of voters approve this policy,” say, “Three out of every four approve this policy.”
- **Don't tell a reporter you will give him an exclusive story, and then offer it to a competitor:** It is fair to provide a reporter a timeline for which you are willing to hold a story, but let him or her know if he or she is not willing to commit to a story within a specified timeframe you will offer it to another media outlet. However, when letting them know you intend to seek out other media avoid having this come across as a “threat.”
- **Don't ignore reporters' phone calls:** If you regularly miss reporters' calls, they will stop calling. Be a resource even if you do not know the answer to a question. Tell a reporter, “You know, that's not my area; but here are three people who do work on that. You should call them. Here are their numbers.” Reporters will appreciate the help.
- **Don't presume a reporter knows what you are talking about:** Often legislation and government policies use all kinds of acronyms, jargon, rhetoric, mission-statement talk, and insider lingo. Take the time to explain all acronyms and try to translate all terms into language reporters and audiences will understand. Take, for example, the phrase “economic justice.” Translate it so it means something to people: The right to earn a decent paycheck so you can afford a quality education for your children, put food on the table and improve your life.

MEDIA OUTREACH TOOLS

Consider the variety of tools that can be used for sharing information with reporters:

- Media alert/advisory
- News release
- Media pitch
- Fact sheet
- Media kit

In addition to using the materials above to reach out to media, there are additional options to create visibility for new policies in a newspaper or magazine

- Letter to the editor
- Op-ed
- Editorial board meetings
- Deskside briefings
- Video news release/b-roll packages
- Radio news release/actuality

IDENTIFYING REPORTERS AND BUILDING A MEDIA LIST

Before reaching out to the media, you need to develop a clear sense of who your media targets are, what issues are important to them, and how your information can be newsworthy and informative for their readers/viewers. One of the most frequent mistakes made in reaching out to media is not taking the time to understand the audience and tailor your information to that audience. For example, your approach to the media will be very different depending on whether you are reaching out to a media person whose reporting focus is business, politics, employment issues, feature/local coverage, or national policy issues. All of these reporters are relevant to promoting policies, yet the approach for each will be distinct and unique. Understanding your audience and your message will help you more effectively direct your outreach to appropriate reporters and media outlets.

Consider media in the various categories:

- Wire services (Associated Press, Reuters, and Bloomberg)
- Daily and weekly newspapers
- Local radio
- Specialized industry publications and blogs

Reporters are often assigned to news beats, which means they cover a specific subject matter or demographic. In the case of legislative or policy-focused news, many media outlets have a reporter dedicated to just covering government or policy stories. If the publication or media outlet doesn't have beats, ask for a news or feature reporter. Key media players include:

- **Editor/managing editor:** The editor and/or managing editor has overall responsibility for the print publication and determines which stories will run and what will be cut. Publishers rely on editors to ensure that news content meets journalistic standards and fulfills the needs and demands of its audiences.
- **Producers:** Serve a similar role as the editor/managing editor of print publications, but for broadcast news through television and radio outlets.
- **Assignment managers:** Assigns reporters to cover specific stories. Assignment managers often rotate within the newsroom, so it is important to call the media outlet and ask to speak to the Assignment Desk if you do not know the name of the current assignment manager.
- **Guest bookers:** Though rarely listed in media directories, guest bookers are responsible for finding guests to appear on television and radio news shows. Their job is to find guests that meet the criteria outlined by broadcast producers.
- **Reporters:** If you have an ongoing relationship with a reporter, or you know specifically which reporter you need to contact to suggest a story, you can often bypass the editor/managing or producer. However, when presenting story ideas to a reporter, it is imperative that you provide the relevant information he or she will need to get approval from the editor.

When sending emails, make sure your subject title fits into the subject line of the email. Like your news release headline, the email subject title should attract a reporter's attention and entice him or her to want to read more. Do not send news releases as attachments unless the reporter requests it. Instead, put the text of media material into the body of the email.

NONTRADITIONAL MEDIA OUTREACH

Complement the previously listed outreach methods with less traditional approaches. Here's a quick list of ideas designed to help you come up with more of your own:

- In some areas, the Home Shopping Network welcomes public service announcements. They may appear at 3 a.m., but that's when parents may be awake with a colicky baby and turn on the TV. So, this might be a great time for an announcement about the benefits of the Women, Infants, and Children Nutrition Program, home-visiting services, or any early childhood development services.
- Tell the national organizations you are associated with that you would be willing to help participate in local news events to publicize the release of a national report. For example, when the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Kids Count reports are released, local reporters are always eager for connections to local families and service providers who can provide a local angle and put a human face to the many charts and graphs.
- If your legislators come to your organization for a site visit, offer to write an article and take a photo they can use in their newsletter that goes out to all the constituents in the district.
- Create an annual award that you can present to your legislator for crafting or signing beneficial legislation. Draft and send a press release announcing the award to your local media. Awards should be small and should not violate Congressional ethics policies.

SOCIAL MEDIA

CREATING A SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY

A social media strategy is only one part of a larger communications effort and should be integrated into your overall communications planning, activities, and data collection. Therefore, overarching goals should be considered when developing social media activities.

The keys to effective social media outreach are identifying target audience(s), determining objective(s), knowing outlet(s), and deciding on the amount of resources (time and effort) that can be invested. Having clear communication objectives will help build your strategy. For example, you will probably need different strategies for each campaign. Because the objectives for each campaign are different, the way you exchange ideas, collaborate with partners, or encourage behavior change will also be different.

Likewise, understanding your audience(s) will help you determine the channel selection and how you use specific channels. People access information in different ways, at different times, and for different reasons. Defining your audience needs using market research, metrics, and other data will be important to determining the channels you want to use. Each channel is different and has differing engagement, content, and community norms. Understanding the way people naturally use or participate in social media channels is also very helpful in determining your strategy.

Key steps to building a social media strategy include:

- **Set your objectives:** Be strategic and follow demographic and user data to make choices based on audience, communications objectives, key messages, and exact call to action that you want to elicit from your campaign. Be sure to assess the level of effort needed to maintain these channels such as time and commitment.

- **Identify the audience you would like to reach:** Tailor your message and the way you tell it to your intended audience. Review social media sites' user statistics and demographics to choose the right platforms. Also assess opportunities with niche social networking sites that target specific groups, like moms, physicians, or racial and ethnic groups; or sites that focus on a particular topic like travel or health.
- **Define your message:** Outline the story you want to tell. Be clear on what kind of values, problems, solutions, and actions are involved. Focus on creating content for your target audience that is useful, sharable, and fosters engagement. Make it easy for people to become advocates for your campaign.
- **Learn from metrics and evaluate your efforts:** Digital communications offer many metrics that you can use to focus and improve your communications efforts. Metrics can help you report usage, monitor trends, and gauge the success of specific promotions or outreach efforts. Beyond simple metrics, social media efforts can also be evaluated by measuring the use of information and level of engagement with your content.

Monitoring trends and discussions on social media networks can also be a valuable way to better understand current interests, knowledge levels, and potential misunderstandings or myths about your topic. Social media provides a direct feedback loop with your audience. By analyzing the feedback available through your social media tools, you can adjust your social media strategy, reshape messages, improve processes, or shift tactics.

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

There are a variety of social media tools that can be used as part of an integrated communications program. It is often beneficial to start with social media projects that may be considered low risk or use fewer resources at the outset, and then adopt more engaging tools that may require additional resources, expertise, and leadership support.

Facebook

Using Facebook to build and promote a grassroots advocacy campaign is an excellent way to grow a large base of fans and followers. When the time comes for your organization to take action, you can call upon these followers to participate in your outreach and legislative efforts. Here are tips to successful Facebook advocacy campaigns:

- **Keep it short:** Most experts recommend posts of up to just 50 characters or less to generate the highest engagement.
- **Make it visual:** Add your organization's photos or stock photos. Photos add visual interest and are considered one of the most engaging types of content on Facebook.
- **Post regularly:** Regular engagement is the key to attracting followers and keeping the followers you have. Try to post to your Facebook page several times a week.
- **Activate your community:** Encourage your staff to share and like your posts. You can also encourage them to turn on notifications to find out whenever there is new content on your branch page.
- **Sell your brand:** Make sure the content you post is branded with your logo. Branding helps ensure that your organization is credited when your content is shared, and it helps increase visibility and name recognition.
- **Promote your events and programming:** Create events on your Facebook page to advertise press conferences, rallies, and advocacy days.
- **Drive traffic to your website:** Link posts to your website or Social Current's website to encourage followers to learn more about your work and how to be involved.

- **DO NOT:** Follow elected officials campaign pages, as this can be considered a political endorsement by the IRS.

Twitter

Today, almost all legislators and policymakers have a Twitter account and use it regularly to engage with their constituents, making it a powerful tool for advocacy. Here is how to optimize your Twitter campaign:

- **Use the right hashtags:** Use hashtags that are trending when possible, rather than creating your own. Here are tips on how to identify popular hashtags about your organization's work. Be sure to include your organization's hashtag when tweeting. Also, don't forget to use local hashtags. For examples, specific hashtags often exist for state and local elections.
- **Tweet regularly:** If you're just starting off, aim to tweet at least twice a day. You can use a free tool like Hootsuite or TweetDeck to schedule tweets.
- **Make it visual:** Each post should contain an image or video.
- **Perform direct outreach to key influencer groups:** Identify key influencer groups to follow. It's also important to reach out to these accounts directly about your work. The goal, of course, is for them to engage and share your message.
- **Community collaborators:** Follow your local community groups (college campuses, high schools, nonprofits, women's professional groups, etc.), and reach out them with links and information about relevant events and programming.
- **Members of the media:** Find the Twitter accounts for local journalist and bloggers, and tweet them links to your events, announcements, or blog posts. Many journalists list their Twitter handles in their bylines.
- **Elected officials:** Twitter is a great way to interact directly with elected officials, who are often highly active on the platform. Tweet your officials with your messages and write sample tweets and encourage your followers to tweet them to the elected officials.

Make sure to tag their official Twitter account, not their campaign account, as this can be seen as a political endorsement. To identify the official account, be sure it's linked to an email that ends in .gov.

- **Evaluate your efforts:** Track your efforts and regularly review the number of followers, updates, retweets, and mentions in Twitter. There are also a number of ways to monitor increased traffic to your website, as well as the mentions outside of Twitter on blogs, websites or articles. With regular monitoring of Twitter efforts, it is easy to track increased traffic to your website generated by click-throughs of your links, changes in your followers, and the number of retweets of your messages. Many evaluation metrics for Twitter can be collected for little or no cost. Track click-throughs from your links: Website analytics platforms, such as Google Analytics, allow you to track increases in website traffic from Twitter by measuring how many followers click through from Twitter links back to your site.
- Follow and engage with Social Current's Twitter account.
- **Explore other ways to use Twitter:**
 - Twitter chat
 - Twitter town hall
 - Live tweeting
 - Twitter storm

- **Define the purpose:** Identify the target audience, the main messages, and communication goals prior to developing content.
- **Plan your content and publish regularly:** Establish an editorial calendar for plotting out posts or episodes to achieve specific monthly objectives.
- **Use keywords strategically:** Think about what keywords people would use to search for a post and include them in the body text and headers. Make sure the keyword placement is natural and does not seem out of place.
- **Provide additional information and resources:** Link related content you've produced, as well resources from partners and thought leaders, in your posts or in the show notes.
- **Promote your content:** Have a promotion plan in place that leverages all your organization's communications channels and partners.
- **Determine how to handle comments:** Develop a comment policy that covers the response to inappropriate, derogatory or off topic comments, along with a protocol to handle inquiries and incorrect information.
- **Make use of web analytics tools:** Monitor key metrics through Google Analytics and/or your podcast hosting service.

Blogs and Podcasts

Consider creating a blog or a podcast, where you can regularly publish news, information, and thought leadership related to your mission and the issues you care about. While the delivery format is different, many of the tips for success are the same: