

WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

HOW TO:

PREPARE A PRESS CONFERENCE OR MEDIA EVENT

GOALS

- Get media attention for your issue and organizations
- Control how your message is conveyed to the public

KEY TECHNIQUES

- Be selective about the occasions which justify a press conference or event
- Be highly organized and disciplined about the message to be presented
- Plan to have no more than thirty minutes of the reporters' time

Planning: The Basics

Keep in mind the five basics of a story: who, what, when, why and where.

- **Define your goals** for the press conference. Consider the following:
 - › What media outlets do you want to cover your event and why.
 - › Are you trying to influence a particular decision?
 - › Are you trying to get the public's attention so they join your cause?
 - › Are you trying to keep an issue in the public and decision makers' eyes?
 - › Are you trying to develop your groups' skills?
- **Define your message and spokespeople.** Figure out what you want to convey and whom you want it to reach. The entire press conference should focus on one clear primary message and 1-2 secondary messages. All the speakers should come back to these messages in their comments.

The Non-Profit Housing Association
of Northern California
369 Pine Street, Suite 350
San Francisco, CA 94104
[ph]415.989.8160
[f]415.989.8166

www.nonprofithousing.org



Planning: Your Speakers

Select spokespeople who are connected to the messages, as well as well spoken and disciplined.

- **Limit your event to 3 speakers** and have each of them represent a different interest or point of view.
- **Have each person speak briefly** – no longer than 10 minutes each.
- **The spokespeople should be people the public holds in high regard**, including public employees (nurses, firefighters, police officers), faith leaders, residents we can relate to and experts in the field.
- **Elected officials need extra care.** They can often attract media, however you need a strong relationship with them or their staff to keep them on message.
- **Choose a moderator who is very comfortable with public speaking.** Have him or her welcome everyone, introduce the speakers and keep the press conference moving. The moderator should be able to politely move speakers along if they talk too long.

Planning: The Finer Points

Attention to these details can make the difference between a good event and a great one.

- **Specifically define the “news” you have.** Reporters don’t come to a press conference just because you think an issue is important, they need news to sell the story to their boss. Examples include:
 - › Is an important study being released?
 - › Do you have someone with a personal story to share?
 - › Has your coalition grown to include unlikely allies?
 - › Is there a conflict or a controversy, such as the city keeping information from the public?
- **Select the date carefully**, balancing your need for sufficient planning time with the need to use a newsworthy date, such as:
 - › Can you tie your issue to current dates or events (Mothers Day, Christmas, back to school)
 - › Is there an important decision happening (will the champion Councilmember join the press conference?)

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- **Choose the time in consideration of the reporters' deadlines.** Early in the day is better if you want print coverage the next morning. Later in the afternoon may get you coverage on the evening television news, if you have good visuals. Tuesday through Thursday are the best days to get news coverage. Check for any competing events that will steal the media.
- **Pick a location that is easy to get to and helps to tell your story.** Consider the following:
 - › Is the site a visually interesting location, such as the site of residents who might lose their homes, or at the local office of an elected official who won't support you.
 - › Is the location public and do you need permission.
 - › If you plan to do the press conference outside, consider how wind, traffic and other noises may affect the quality of TV and radio coverage.
- › **Consider using a visual presentation or a gag to draw TV and photographers.** Make sure the gag is tied to the message and not distracting. Examples of good visuals include a large crowd in matching shirts, workers in uniform, neighbors building a house and oversized greeting card.

Preparing For Your Event

- **Target your media audience** including specific outlets and specific reporters. Use your list of media contacts. See tool: "How To: Build Capacity For Media Relations."
- **Create goals for reasonable minimum of coverage** – one all-news radio station, one newspaper, and one TV station. News radio and the morning paper can define the day's news, leading to follow-up stories by other outlets.
- **Write a press advisory and a press release.** See tool: "How To: Write Press Advisories and Press Releases."
- **Invite the media.** After you send out the press advisory (one week before the event) call reporters to make sure they received it. Specifically ask whether they will cover the event. Remember to explain how this is "news" so that they can easily see the story that they would write. Call them all again the day before or the day of the event to remind them to come.

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- **Build a crowd to show public interest and attract the media.** Divide up lists of members and allies. Call them a week before to let them know about the press conference. Call them the day before to remind them. This is a good task for volunteers to help with and to divide up among coalition partners.
- **Help spokespeople prepare their talking points** and review what they will say at the press conference. Decide who is doing what, and do a dry run if possible.
- **Plan to rehearse the day of the press conference.** Rehearse the tough questions. Consider practicing with video cameras so speakers get used to their presence.
- **Make sure all the spokespeople have a document with the basic messages and the answers to tough questions.**
- **Prepare your moderator** to make sure he or she knows how to pronounce the speakers' and organization's names. Include the moderator in rehearsals.
- **Prepare the charts, maps, signs, pictures, and any “gag” visuals you're using.** This is a good task to delegate to volunteers and one that can be done well in advance. Base the size of your visuals on the distance they will be from the audience.
- **Prepare a media kit** and bring a set for every member of the press. You can put these in a folder or just staple it together. It should include the following:
 - › Copies of press release and media advisory,
 - › Summary of your issue and arguments,
 - › Organizations supporting your side, with names of spokespeople and contact information,
 - › Fact sheet with relevant background data,
 - › Maps and copies of relevant public documents
 - › text of statements.
- **Arrange to have staff for the event who will:**
 - › greet the media, pass out press kits, and record their names
 - › welcome members and allies
 - › hold signs
 - › keep the event on time and make sure speakers are ready
 - › answer questions from the media

Executing Your Event

- **Arrive early:** Instruct community members and allies to arrive 15- 20 minutes early to make sure you have a crowd there when reporters arrive. TV reporters usually arrive early to set up. Greet the reporters when they arrive and give them press kits.
- **Start on time and keep it short:** Reporters don't have much time. Start on time and keep your presentation to 30 minutes total. Take questions afterward. Keep your answers short and on message. Have the moderator prepared to wrap it up and thank everyone for coming.
- **Follow up with reporters who did not attend** by sending the press release and calling. Ask them if they were covering something else. Offer to help them with information and contacts if they would like to do a feature story about your issue at another time.
- **Debrief and discuss what worked and what didn't** with your press conference or event team, including speakers. Make notes and remember the lessons learned for next time. Consider the following specifics:
 - › How many reporters came?
 - › Is any follow up needed on unanswered questions?
 - › Was there news coverage on your message?
 - › Did you meet your goal?
 - › Did you start on time?
 - › How did the speakers do?
 - › How big was the crowd?