

Working with the News Media

Advantages:

- Helps get your ideas, conclusions/suggestions to thousands of people
- Helps give your work more credibility
- Funders appreciate effort to share info broader
- Can help strengthen public policy

Disadvantages

- News media may misinterpret your information
- News media may miss points you think are key
- Coverage may produce unwanted controversy

Key ways to proceed

- Think about MEDIA person's goals, not your goals. Their goal is to get people reading/listening/watching. To do this, they try to provoke, entertain, challenge. How are you helping them accomplish their goals?
- Try to meet media needs, provide them with something that people do not know, do not expect, and have not previously understood.
- Write one page press release that begins with the single most important point of the study/report, and highlights other key points.
- Begin report with one page summary with major points.
- Meet ahead of time with major news media.
- Embargo story until Monday morning (media often look for Monday stories).
- Mention funder(s) in press release. Send funders a copy of the press release.
- Follow up press release with brief phone call.
- Recognize that anything you say to the news media can be used.
- When a journalist calls you, try hard to respond within an hour. Reporters often are on deadline. Calling the next day may be too late. Journalists remember who does and does not call them back quickly. Make sure that the person who answers your phone knows you want to be notified IMMEDIATELY when a journalist calls. Then you can decide if you need to take the call immediately, or ask your administrative assistant to set a get a specific time for you to call back.
- Think about various media outlets, community newspapers, radio stations, Associated Press, TV, as well as major newspapers.
- Consider meeting with editorial page person, not just reporters.
- If you don't know the answer to a media question, say that. If possible, offer to find the answer. But don't take on more than is possible
- Humility helps. So does persistence. NO ONE controls the media.
- Mistakes happen. People are human. Sometimes an editor removes something that a reporter included. Some headlines do not fairly reflect the story. Although this can be frustrating, even infuriating, all of us make mistakes.
- Write to a reporter or editor after she has covered something you suggested. Thank her/him for the time spent on the article/column/coverage. Don't say "thanks for the great story." A journalist's job is to attract & serve readers, not please you.

Reactions welcome:

Joe Nathan, Center for School Change, joe@centerforschoolchange.org