

ROGUE ACTION CENTER

Tools for Organizing: Organizing a Media Event

Define clear goals.

- What is the strategic reason to generate media coverage? To put pressure on an employer, elected official, or other target? To build community support?
- What potential downsides could there be? If you were our opponent, how would you respond?
- What is our clear, concise message? How can it be framed to be interesting to the media and appealing to the public?

Choose whether a media event is the best way to get coverage. Hold a news conference *only* for a major story that should be presented to several reporters at the same time. A poorly attended event makes us look weak and will hurt us with busy reporters who are short on time. If it is likely that only newspaper reporters – not photographers or television cameras – will cover a news conference, consider offering one-on-one interviews at the newspaper's office, at your campaign office, or over the phone instead. You might check with a friendly reporter to see whether the event sounds newsworthy. If you go ahead, make sure the event delivers what was promised to reporters or you risk losing credibility with them for future events.

Choose the right location.

- Make it accessible to the media -- a place that is not too far to get to and where there is room to set up cameras.
- Consider locations that will reinforce our main message -- in front of a corporation's or agency's offices, for example.
- Try not to set up an event along a busy street where car, bus, and truck noise will interfere with the sound quality for electronic media.
- When scouting locations, be mindful of where sun will be during your event. You do not want cameras to shoot directly into sunlight. If it is an outdoor event, have an alternative in case of bad weather.
- When appropriate, notify police of the event ahead of time so the event comes off without a fight with authorities in front of cameras or reporters.

Choose the right time.

- In general, do it between 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. so it is not too early for reporters to start and not too late for them to organize their coverage before their deadlines.
- Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday are the best days to do media events. Monday can be a hard day for which to pitch reporters because it has to be done the week before. Friday means press coverage will be on Saturday, which is the day people pay the least attention to news. It is often difficult to get reporters to an event on the weekend, unless it is compelling and helps fill the weekend news hole.

- If it is something that could be reasonably expected to get live TV coverage -- such as a demonstration that blocks rush-hour traffic -- then holding it when the local evening news is on might make sense.

Develop a short, effective pitch to reporters.

- You will have less than a minute to grab reporters' or editors' attention on the phone or with an advisory. Don't use the time to tell them why this story is important to *you*. Quickly paint a picture of why this will be a good story for *them*, including why their readers or viewers will find it interesting, why it is timely, what good visuals there will be, and what interesting quotes and human interest angles you will help them get.
- Don't overpromise or exaggerate what the event will consist of. That may work once to get reporters to come, but will make them angry and hurt future relationships.

Get the word out.

- Send out a short "media advisory" at least three days ahead if possible to give reporters a heads-up. It should be in large type and highlight the pitch you've developed, clearly telling reporters and editors why the event will make a good story for them with interesting visuals. Include the five Ws – who, what, when, where, and why. Include a contact person's name, email, and cell phone number.
- Send it to assignment desks as well as individual reporters on your list in case your contact is out of town or unavailable.
- *Call* reporters after sending the advisory. Don't assume that because you sent it they read it. Call before late afternoon when they may be on deadline for a story.
- If you don't know whom to call at a news organization, ask for the "assignment editor" or "news editor." Don't just ask if they got the advisory. Say you are calling about a story you think they will find interesting and ask who to talk to.

Help reporters do their job.

- Prepare a news release that conveys our main message and provides the necessary facts. In some cases, it makes sense to put the key facts in a one- or two-page fact sheet with easy-to-read bullets. Press materials should include the correct names and titles of each speaker.
- At the event, introduce yourself to each reporter and make sure you get their name, email address, and phone numbers. (At a news conference, a sign-in sheet makes this easier.)
- Give each reporter an overview of the event, find out what they are interested in, and introduce them to workers or community members who you have already prepared to be spokespeople.
- After the event, ask each reporter if they got the information and quotes they needed, and make sure they know how to contact you.
- Email the materials to reporters who didn't attend, and then call them.

Make sure workers or community members do the talking.

- They usually have the most credibility and best heart-felt stories, and they make it hard for opponents to put the focus on organizational interests.
- Choose spokespeople who reflect diversity and who can talk about personal experiences that reinforce our main message.

Help worker/community spokespeople prepare for the event.

- Talk with them about why the event has been planned, how it fits into the overall goals of the campaign, what the desired outcome is, and what to expect at the media event.
- Talk with them about how to frame their goals and concerns in a way that will connect to the public interest -- for example: quality, affordable health care; reliable public services; and/or the good jobs our communities need.
- Work with spokespeople to get a feel for how they naturally talk and what specific examples they can give. Then help them prepare brief, written remarks that include clear, quotable sound bites that emphasize our main message.
- Encourage them to roleplay and practice their remarks out loud. If TV cameras will be present, see if spokespeople can get so familiar with what they are going to say that they can say it without reading -- so they'll be looking at the viewer. If not, encourage them to achieve the same effect by looking down to remind themselves of the next line and then looking up to actually say that line. This may seem unnatural, but explain that it will result in sound bites that are more likely to be used on TV.
- Urge them to take a deep breath and relax before they start and to take their time.
- Anticipate the questions reporters are likely to ask and help spokespeople practice giving answers that repeat their public interest message. Help them practice bridging from a question back to their talking points.
- Ask spokespeople to wear their work clothes, if appropriate, so the public can visually connect them with the service they provide.

Involve community allies as speakers and to attend the event.

- This may include political, community, or religious supporters and users of services such as families of nursing home residents or parents of children who need public health or education services. They can help emphasize that we are acting in the public interest – and can help draw news media to the event.
- Talk with supporters ahead of time to let them know what the purpose of the event is and go over their role and our key message. If needed, write talking points for supporters or share with them the overall talking points for the event. Don't assume that because they support us they will automatically be on message.

Create a good “visual” for newspaper photographers and TV cameras. The visual image may be all the typical reader or viewer absorbs, and designing it carefully can give us some control over what message the public receives.

- Cameras often zoom in for a podium shot that focuses on the area directly around the speaker's head. Make a podium sign with a message that is consistent with the theme of the event, for example, “Working for Quality Care” or “Public Services First.” Put it at the very top of the podium so it fits in the camera's frame.
- Hang a banner with a similar message behind the podium (not very high or wide or it won't fit in the frame). The message should be repeated many times so you don't have to show the whole banner for the message to be in the shot.
- Make signs a color other than white, which looks washed out in camera shots.
- Consider having a group of workers or community members stand closely behind the speakers to show visually that the speakers are part of a movement. Take charge and move people into position if they are standing too far apart or not lining up correctly.
- Use other “visuals,” like a blow-up of a document or a prop that dramatizes our point.

Control when the event ends. Reporters often have busy schedules and will not have the patience to wait very long for the main attraction. Plan to have a few good speakers. Remind leaders and staff that the goal of a good media event can be undermined by an endless series of speakers who "have to be included." The period for reporters to ask questions at a news conference should last long enough so that they feel they got what they needed, but not so long that the discussion loses focus and leads to areas that undermine the key message.

Evaluate and learn for the future. While it is still fresh in your mind, think through what worked, what didn't, and what improvements could be made. When appropriate, go over these points with the members and staff who helped plan the event to help make future events better.