

## Getting Media Coverage

There's no such thing as a free lunch (or so they say) but you can get free media coverage (sort of).

Technically, free media means you don't pay for advertising. But in reality, free media costs time and effort. It's unlikely that reporters will crawl out of the woodwork to report on your cause if you just sit on your sofa eating bonbons. Hence the term "earned" media.

While you might get some media coverage by parachuting off a tall building in a Spider-Man outfit, the easier way to get coverage is through the strategic use of pitches and press releases. Again, if you can afford it, a good PR firm can really help you get more, and better, earned media coverage.

### Proactive Pitches

When most people think of earned media, they think of press releases. Press releases can be useful—to a point. The "mass blast" techniques of paid newswires produce limited results. How many times has your phone rung off the hook after you distribute a release? How many times has it rung once?

A more effective way to get coverage is to pitch individual reporters with whom you've built a professional relationship. Tailor your communications to the needs and format of each reporter and outlet. Do they like short stories or long ones? If it's TV, do you have a story that will look interesting and engaging when it shows up on the evening news? Before you contact a media outlet, have a reasonably good sense of the reporter you're pitching to. Are they the right person? Will your topic interest them? You should read the publication, watch the show, listen to the host, etc. Be familiar with the outlet's coverage and, most importantly, its audience. If you're making a pitch, check that the reporter has time to speak with you.

So, how do you research a media outlet? Preliminary research varies by type of media.

- **Print.** If the publication has an online archive, search it for past coverage of your specific issue. Then check search engines like Google and Yahoo. Get a sense of who's covered what in the past and use that information when contacting the publication.

- **Television.** Watch a few segments of the news program you're targeting before contacting the producers. That way, you'll have a feel for the style of the show and the on-air personalities. Make sure you have enticing visual hooks.
- **Online.** Online media is usually archived, making it easy to get an overview of a website or blog before reaching out. If contacting a blogger, remember that you'll want to approach him or her with the same professionalism you'd show other journalists, even if the blogger's personality seems informal and familiar to you.
- **Radio.** Spend some time listening to the show you want to contact. Get a feel for the host, the journalistic style, and the general format, and then reach out.

### Building Relationships with Reporters

It's easier to get coverage if you build relationships with key, interested, and sympathetic reporters. Offer yourself as a resource, someone ready to give information, supply quotes, or refer the reporter to other people. Become the reporter's "go-to" organization for LGBT issues, even when the story won't mention your organization. If you don't have answers, help find them. Even if the reporter is doing a feature article on gay bowling leagues, find them someone to talk to. Get reporters to call you first, so you'll be first in line when it matters.

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Call them with compliments on good coverage, not just with complaints on coverage you didn't like. Do this even if the coverage didn't mention your group. Make good-faith efforts to cultivate relationships by holding lunch or coffee meetings. Proactively let reporters know about important events or stories related to your work. Give them a heads-up on a release, or extend an invitation to a press call.

Make sure you tailor your communications to their individual needs. For example, one reporter may prefer faxed press releases, while another might respond better to two-line pitch emails. Good relationships will help you get your story heard and covered.

### Creating the Contact List

The inevitable question arises: which reporters should you target? Be strategic and start with sympathetic reporters who've covered your issues in the past. Build a contact list by mining fee-based directories that publish journalists' names and contacts (e.g., American Journalism Review Newslink, Bacon's MediaSource, Burrellesluce, NewsDirectory.com, New Media Yellow Book, News Voyager, PR Newswire, Radio Station World, Vocus). If you have trouble getting started, contact GLAAD for assistance in gathering press contacts in your region.

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If you build a custom media list in-house, vigilantly update the contact information. You can fail to reach significant media targets because you sent the press release to the wrong reporter, or to one who left the publication. Develop a spreadsheet or contact database with the contact's name, title, phone number, fax, and email address. Where you can, include publication circulation information, past coverage of issues, and a contact history. Note that it's particularly valuable to target the relevant reporters at the major wire services like The Associated Press or Reuters. If you can get a major wire service to cover your issue, the story may be picked up by papers across the country.

Ideally, before you contact a media outlet to pitch a story, have a specific name, or, at the very least, a title and department.

- **Print.** Assignment editors and local/section editors can refer you to the right contact at their print outlet, though you can also start with staff reporters who've covered your issues in the past.
- **Television.** Producers, segment producers, news producers, and assignment editors should be your first contacts. At larger media outlets, you may be sent to several departments before you reach the right person. While they have busy schedules, news producers are always looking for new stories, so even if they can't take

*"In all of your relationships with reporters, adopt a long-term perspective. You should craft your pitch carefully in such a way that—even if the reporter doesn't take you up on your offer this time—you can be confident your next pitch will be read. This helps cultivate your standing as a reliable source."*

—PR Newswire

time to listen when you first make contact, persistence (without being annoying) often pays off in the long run.

- **Online.** Contact web editors, freelance writers, columnists, and bloggers. Many web outlets are more flexible than traditional outlets, so you can suggest stories for immediate publication or outside normal news cycles.
- **Radio.** Producers, segment producers, and operations managers handle pitches and booking requests for talk radio programs.

### Know the News Cycle

Keep the news cycle in mind when contacting any media outlet. Print and television outlets tend to have the most predictable news cycles, while online and radio outlets are more erratic.

- **Print.** Contact daily papers in the morning and no later than 1 p.m. Understand that you may get edged out by breaking news. Weekly publications tend to have more predictable news cycles. Research the publication dates and make contact as soon as a news cycle begins.
- **Television.** TV production cycles, especially for 24-hour news stations, are fairly consistent. Contact programs as far in advance as possible to pitch your story.
- **Online.** Web publications have fluid production cycles, so contact them with story ideas as soon as they break.

- **Radio.** Radio program schedules operate with short lead times. Build relationships with producers to ensure they contact your organization when your issues are covered.

### Not All Coverage Is Good Coverage

Exercise caution when pitching or responding to a right-wing journalist or media outlet. Most will be hostile and can often do more harm than good no matter how well you prepare for the interview or story. We know it's hard to turn down a spot on national television. However, just because you're invited to appear on a shouting-head show doesn't mean you should volunteer to go get shouted at. Pursue coverage that helps you get your message across—not coverage designed to attack you.

Find out who you'll be debating and how they debate. Some conservative media personalities and opponents engage in civilized debates that could be worth your time. Others will simply sling mud till the question isn't *if* any sticks, it's *how much*.

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