

# Chapter

# 7

## CONDUCT MEDIA RELATIONS

**PURPOSE** *To provide ideas for securing positive stories on local television and radio stations and in local newspapers and magazines.*

### In this Chapter

- BUILD A MEDIA CONTACT LIST
- SEND PRESS RELEASES OR PITCH LETTERS
- TIPS FOR WORKING WITH THE MEDIA
- SUBMIT PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENTS
- SUBMIT A COLUMN TO YOUR NEWSPAPER

## BUILD A MEDIA CONTACT LIST

8-16 hrs.

TIME INVOLVED:

**PURPOSE** *To develop a comprehensive, up-to-date list of producers and reporters at local television stations, producers and announcers at local radio stations and editors and reporters at newspapers and magazines.*

### **Step 1 — Create a list of all the media in your area.**

Include television stations, radio stations that cover events in your community, daily newspapers, community weekly newspapers and local magazines.

### **Step 2 — Call each outlet to introduce yourself.**

Ask to whom you should address your press releases and story ideas. Get this person's full name, title, direct phone number, fax number, mailing address and e-mail address.

### **Step 3 — Identify deadline requirements and technical needs.**

Television stations, radio stations, daily newspapers and weekly or monthly publications will all have different deadline requirements. You will increase your chances of getting coverage if you know and can accommodate each of their deadlines.

These media outlets also have different technical needs. For example, television stations need good visuals and require a spokesperson who can speak in short, simple sentences.

Radio stations also need to record a spokesperson who can speak in "sound bites." Radio requires interesting background noise. For example, they may want to record the sounds of people talking while using the computers.

The print media — newspapers and magazines — typically require interviews with one or two spokespeople who can speak knowledgeably about your library and the public access computing program. Newspapers may also want a good photograph to help illustrate the story. (Daily newspapers usually send their own photographer; weekly or monthly publications may use a photo that you provide.)

### **Step 4 — Create a "Media Contact List." (See the following sample.)**

Use Microsoft Excel to enter all the information you collected in this grid.

### **Step 5 — Update your media list every six months.**

People in the media tend to change jobs frequently, so it will be important to update your media list on a regular basis.



Sample Media Contact List

ORGANIZATION	CONTACT	TITLE	ADDRESS	PHONE	FAX	E-MAIL	DEADLINE
Daily Herald	Mary Smith	City Editor	1111 Elm St., Anywhere, USA 11111	123-456-7890	123-456-7890	Msmith @herald.com	Needs press releases by noon on Mondays.

To download this template so you can use it at your library [CLICK HERE](#)

## SEND PRESS RELEASES OR PITCH LETTERS

8-16 hrs.

TIME INVOLVED:

PURPOSE *To alert the media to stories about your library.*



### HELPFUL HINT

**Remember to publicize only what you can handle.** Make sure your staff and volunteers are prepared for any results of your media efforts.

### Step 1 — Develop a story idea.

The fact that your library offers free access to computers and the Internet is a bright, “good news” story. Most importantly, access to technology has the power to change people’s lives. Because of this, media in your community may be interested in coming to your library to get a firsthand look at the computers and interview you and the people who are using them.

You may be more successful in getting coverage if you first develop a “hook,” or an angle that will interest your local reporters.

Some possible story ideas include:

- Arrival of new computers.
- An open house to demonstrate new computers.
- Introduction of new computer classes or programs.
- Tie-in to the launch of other programs, such as your summer reading program or Black History Month celebration.
- Interesting stories about people who have used the computers successfully (e.g., maybe you know of someone who found a job using your computers).

### Step 2 — Write a press release or a pitch letter.

There are two basic tools you can use to tell the media your story idea: a press release and a pitch letter.



### HELPFUL HINT

**For guidance on media relations activities** as they relate to your technology programs, please e-mail [media@gatesfoundation.org](mailto:media@gatesfoundation.org).

A press release is a short story that tells the who, what, when, where and why about an event or your program. Use a press release when your story is time sensitive. Your press release should be no more than two pages long, and words and sentences should be kept short. Paragraphs should also be short, no more than six lines.

Give your press release a headline that is as compelling as possible. The headline will be the first thing that editors read and can help pre-sell them on the story. Use journalistic shorthand on your press release; write “more” at the bottom of a page when the release continues to another page and “###” to denote the end of the release.

A pitch letter is a letter or memo written to create an interest in your issue. Use a pitch letter only if there is no urgency to your issue, because it may take several weeks for the media to decide if they will write about it.

Your pitch letter should be addressed to a specific person in the media, such as the city editor at your local newspaper. (If you have a good relationship with this person, it would be better to call the person rather than write a formal letter.) The pitch letter can be effective because it is more personal than a press release, and it shows that you actually care enough about your story to take the time to write a personal letter.

In both the press release and pitch letter, your grammar and spelling should be perfect, and your facts and numbers must be accurate.

### **Step 3 — Send your press release and pitch letter.**

If you are using a press release to promote an event, plan ahead! Send your press release



#### **GOOD IDEAS**

**The Washington County Public Library in Abingdon, Virginia**, consistently generates interest from local and regional print and television media by reaching out early and supplying the media with photographs to complement stories. For example, at a regional workshop hosted by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and attended by library professionals at the beginning of the grant cycle, library staff took photographs of various county library officials with foundation personnel. Then, Washington County Public Library staff compiled lists of local media representatives and sent them a press release about the event and photographs. This early outreach earned the library a front-page story in at least one local newspaper. The newspaper story resulted in further interest from local television stations, and the stations brought cameras into the library to promote an open house event.

Library staff also worked with the local newspaper to secure a monthly column written by a library staff member. Library staff use the column to update the community on the new activities and services they will be offering. For more details, contact the Washington County Public Library, Abingdon, Virginia, 276-676-6383.

at least two weeks before the event or the date you would like the story printed or broadcast. You can send your press release via e-mail, fax or mail (allow time for delivery).

Be sensitive to editorial deadlines. Newspapers, magazines and broadcast stations work under constant deadline pressure. Because stale news is no news, a release arriving even a little late may just as well never have been sent.

#### **Step 4 — Make a follow-up call.**

Make a quick follow-up call to the producers, editors or reporters to make sure they received the release. Give a short plug for the story and find out if they have any questions.

Try not to call when an editor or reporter is on deadline unless you are answering a specific request or question from him or her.



#### **GOOD IDEAS**

**Claude Caddell, director of the Frankfort Community Public Library** in Indiana, emphasizes cooperation with the small community newspaper. He says he often brings homemade cinnamon bread or other such snacks to the newsroom of the local paper. Although it seems trivial, this ensures that editors are receptive when the library seeks publicity.

Caddell emphasizes the importance of doing background research and adequate preparation when trying to interest the media in a story. It has been his experience that reporters are more likely to run a story when it is “ready-made” with photos. The paper has been very accommodating to story ideas with a strong human interest side. Stories about interesting people, Caddell notes, are easy to find in the library. For more details, contact the Frankfort Community Public Library, Frankfort, Indiana, 765-654-8746.

*Note: These tips may be more effective with smaller weekly newspapers. Larger daily newspapers usually write their own stories and send their own photographer. Weekly or monthly publications may use materials you provide.*

**Polk County Public Library Public Relations Coordinator** Nancy Hiley and Library Director Mark Pumphrey always look for opportunities to publicize the North Carolina library system. When a television station came to the library to cover a state task force meeting being held at the library, Hiley seized the opportunity. She asked the reporter to interview her about the library’s kick-off activities for the “Very Best Places to Start” campaign, a campaign focusing on ways librarians help young people doing research. The interview was broadcast on the weekend news. For more details, contact the Polk County Public Library, Columbus, North Carolina, 828-894-8721.



**Sample press release to publicize an open house**

*(Put on library letterhead and send two weeks before the event.)*

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact:

[LOCAL CONTACT PERSON]

[TELEPHONE NUMBER]

[E-MAIL ADDRESS]

**[YOUR LIBRARY NAME] Holds Open House  
To Unveil New Computer Equipment**

[YOUR TOWN, STATE] – [DATE] — The [YOUR LIBRARY NAME] will host an open house on [DATE] to introduce the library’s new computers and software from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The computers are available for the public to use free of charge.

“Our library plays a key role in offering all community members free access to a world of learning through computers and the Internet,” said [INSERT NAME AND TITLE]. “These computers are available for everyone to use, whether you are searching the Internet for information, sending an e-mail or using a word processing program to create a résumé.”

The [YOUR LIBRARY NAME] has [LIST EQUIPMENT IN THE LIBRARY, SUCH AS “TWO NEW GATEWAY COMPUTERS”] for all to use.

The open house is scheduled for [TIME]. Refreshments will be served, and staff members will be available to answer questions and demonstrate how to use the computers.

The library is located at [ADDRESS] and serves more than [NUMBER] people each year.

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**Note to Editor:**

Interview Opportunities: [NAME, TITLE] will be available for interviews during the open house. Please contact [NAME] at [TELEPHONE NUMBER] or [E-MAIL] to arrange.

Photo Opportunities: There will be excellent photo opportunities of children and adult library patrons using the computers.



**Sample pitch letter**

*(Put on library letterhead.)*

[DATE]

[NAME]

[TITLE]

[NAME OF MEDIA OUTLET]

[ADDRESS]

[ADDRESS]

Dear [NAME]:

A young student uses the Internet to conduct research for her school newspaper. A senior citizen e-mails her granddaughter in college. A job seeker uses word processing software to create a résumé that will help him get a job.

These are just a few examples of how computers at [NAME OF LIBRARY] are connecting our community members with information and breaking down barriers to knowledge.

Unfortunately, many people in our area do not have easy access to computers and the Internet. Here at [NAME OF LIBRARY], we can help solve this problem by offering free public access to computers and the Internet for everyone. Last year alone, more than [INSERT NUMBER] people used the computers in our library.

I hope you will consider writing an article about the opportunities that the computers and access to knowledge are giving our community. I would be more than happy to arrange interviews with the people and community groups who have benefited from this service.

Enclosed is more information about our library. I will give you a call in a few days to see if I can answer any questions or arrange any interviews, but please don't hesitate to call or e-mail me first with any questions.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

[YOUR NAME]

[TITLE]

[PHONE NUMBER]

[E-MAIL]



## *Tips for working with the media*

Whether the media is knocking on your door for an interview or you are knocking on their door for a story, it is always best to be prepared. These tips can help you prepare for and conduct a successful interview.

### **Interview preparation**

- **Develop three to five messages or “talking points.”** These are the main ideas you want to emphasize during your interview (i.e., new computers and the Internet are now available at the library). Repeat your main points often to ensure the reporter includes them in the story. Anticipate what questions may be asked and be prepared with answers that include these messages.

Your messages should highlight the wonderful opportunity that computers represent, as well as the need for support to maintain and upgrade them.

- **Learn more about the interview.** Ask the reporter about the goal of his or her story. Will it be live or on tape? If it is a radio interview, will listeners be calling in? If it is a TV talk show interview, will there be other guests?
- **Understand the reporter’s deadline.** Find out when the reporter must complete his or her story and plan your interview to give the reporter ample time to do so. If you are responsive to the reporter’s deadline, he or she won’t feel rushed, and your interview will go more smoothly.
- **Give yourself some time to prepare.** Once you know what a reporter wants to cover and his or her deadline, take some time to prepare before being interviewed. If the reporter has contacted you, ask if you can call back within 15 or 30 minutes, depending on his or her deadline. Use that time to collect your thoughts, review your talking points and take a couple of deep breaths before responding.
- **Relax and focus.** Get to your location or in your chair at work 10 to 15 minutes before your interview. Spend time practicing your core message points. Breathing exercises may feel silly, but they will help you feel calm.

### **During the interview**

- **Keep your answers succinct.** Don’t feel compelled to keep talking. When you have covered your message point, stop talking.
- **Do not look straight at the camera.** Stay focused on the interviewer or the task at hand. If you are showing a patron how to use the computer for a newspaper photographer or television camera, keep your focus on the patron and the computer.
- **Do not guess.** If you do not know the answer to a question, it’s all right to say you are not sure. Be sure to find the answer and get back to the reporter as promptly as possible.

- **Personalize the story.** Your own experience is important to the story. Offer simple examples or anecdotes about your observations of people using the computers. Talk about your belief that free, public access to digital information is important.
- **Avoid jargon, technical language and acronyms.** Avoid words that may be unfamiliar to the general public. Try to simplify your explanations and use analogies to explain concepts.
- **Be enthusiastic.** You have a positive story to tell the reporter's readers, viewers and listeners. Smile when it is appropriate and let your enthusiasm come through in your voice.
- **Don't worry about repeated questions.** If the reporter's questions are the same, the content of your answers should remain the same. Reporters sometimes ask the same question in order to get new information for the story, but it may also be to encourage you to give a tighter answer, making for a better sound bite.
- **Remember anything you say may appear in the story.** Nothing is "off the record." Assume from the moment you pick up the phone or walk into an interview, everything you say may be quoted.
- **Never say "No comment."** If you can't comment on a point, emphasize what you can say and return to your points.

#### After the interview

- **Ask the reporter when the story might air or be printed.** You may want to tape or clip the interview.
- **Follow up with the reporter with any unanswered questions.** Try to do so in the same day.
- **Consider sending a thank-you note to the reporter.** This helps you build a good relationship with the media.

**PURPOSE** *To inform community members about the computers in your library with an announcement on your local television and radio stations or in your local newspaper.*

### **Step 1 — Write a public service announcement (PSA).**

A PSA is a free commercial that radio and television stations and newspapers use in the public interest to help nonprofits. PSAs for television and radio stations should be short and tell all the facts in a few sentences. It should be written exactly the way you would like the announcer to read it on air. Use a stopwatch to time how long your message takes; keep it to 15 or 30 seconds.

For newspapers, first contact the advertising directors to determine if they will publish your PSA. If they agree to do so, ask what format they need, or whether their advertising department can produce it for you. Your text for the ad should be minimal, as most newspaper PSAs are small.

### **Step 2 — Send your PSA to local television and radio stations and newspapers.**

Find out if your local television and radio stations have public service directors. They are the ones who should receive your PSA. If a station does not have a public service director, send your PSA to the producer on your media contact sheet.

Send the PSA a few weeks before you would like it to be broadcast or printed. Consider sending other information about your event or program with the PSA. For example, if your PSA promotes an open house, include a flier about the event and a fact sheet on the public access computing program.

### **Step 3 — Make a follow-up call.**

Make a quick follow-up call to make sure the stations and newspapers received the PSA and find out if they have any questions.

### **Step 4 — Write a thank-you note.**

Be sure to thank your contacts if they use the PSA.



**Sample public service announcement for an open house**

*(Put on library letterhead and send three weeks before the event.)*

PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

Date: [DATE]

Contact: [YOUR NAME, TITLE]  
[ADDRESS]  
[ADDRESS]  
[TELEPHONE NUMBER]  
[E-MAIL]

Begin use: Immediately  
Don't use after [DATE OF OPEN HOUSE].

Time: 30 seconds

**New Computers in [NAME OF LIBRARY]**

Would you like to use a computer, but you're not sure how, or you don't have access to one?

The [NAME OF LIBRARY] cordially invites you to an open house on [DAY, DATE], from [TIME] to experience the power of computers and the Internet by using the library's new computers and software. Staff members will be on hand to answer your questions and demonstrate how to use the new computers. For more information, please call [TELEPHONE NUMBER].

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**Sample public service announcement to invite the public to use the computers**

*(Put on library letterhead and send three weeks before you would like it to air.)*

PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

Date: [DATE]

Contact [YOUR NAME, TITLE]  
[ADDRESS]  
[ADDRESS]  
[TELEPHONE NUMBER]  
[E-MAIL]

Begin use: Immediately  
No End Date

Time: 30 seconds

**New Computers in [NAME OF LIBRARY]**

Would you like to use a computer, but you're not sure how, or you don't have access to one?

Visitors to the [NAME OF LIBRARY] can access the Internet and use computers and printers for free. Staff members are always on hand to answer your questions and demonstrate how to use the computers. The library is open [HOURS AND DAYS OF OPERATION]. For more information, please call [TELEPHONE NUMBER].

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**PURPOSE** *To seek public support for your computer program by reaching influential community members through an opinion column.*

An opinion column is an article that discusses an issue of concern in the community, offers possible solutions and asks for support. These columns are usually no more than 750 words and should not be used to discuss organizational programs.

**Step 1 — Conduct a brainstorming session on your column's subject.**

As the title indicates, these columns are “opinions.” They should state your point of view and, ideally, have a “call to action” that asks readers to take a specific step. For example, your column might encourage readers to support an increased library budget. You may have a better chance of having your column published if it relates to a current event or is in response to a recent article in the newspaper.

**Step 2 — Call the person at the newspaper responsible for publishing opinion columns.**

Explain why you want to write a column and generally what it will say. Find out the newspaper's guidelines for these pieces (specifically, how long the column should be).

**Step 3 — Write the column.**

Read the columns in your local newspaper to make sure your style is a good fit.

**Step 4 — Consider asking a local opinion leader to co-author the column.**

Adding a community member with clout to your column will increase the chances that the column will be printed. Look at your “Key Contact List” for potential co-authors.

**Step 5 — Send the column to your newspaper contact and then telephone that person to confirm that he or she received it.**

It often takes several days for the newspaper editor to confirm that the paper will or will not publish your column. The editor may also ask you to make changes to the column.

**Step 6 — Clip your published column and send copies of it to influential contacts.**

Help keep your partners and influential community members informed about your library by sending them a copy of the column with a note that says, “In case you missed it.”