

# Defining an Outreach/Communications Strategy

## A Step-by-Step Process

Adapted from People and Land's Grantee Communications Kit, November 2002.

1. *Set Your Goals.* Define what you are hoping to accomplish. Be it broad-based education, public policy change, fund-raising or changing behavior of the public (Extension calls this *Transformational Education*), an outreach/communication effort has a better chance of being successful if you:
  - a. Are clear and specific about your goals.
  - b. Know what you are trying to accomplish within a given timeframe.
  - c. Set objectives that can be measured.
2. *Identify Your Audience.* Your goal should help you determine with whom you must communicate to accomplish the task. Sometimes you need to reach multiple audiences. For example, if your goal is to shape public policy, you probably have three audiences: voters, key constituents, and decision-makers.
3. *Understanding Your Audience.* Before deciding what to communicate to your audience, it is helpful to step back and listen to the concerns of those you want to reach. Having conversations with members of your audience will allow you to gain a more in-depth understanding of their feelings and beliefs.

It is also important to be aware of the more immediate concerns as audience brings to the issue: current or chronic worries people have about their own families' health, economic status, quality of life, and the future. What is imminent or significant about the issue's impact on the audience that will make it appear on their radar screen?

4. *Develop Fact Sheets.* Developing fact sheets is an excellent way to identify the most convincing and relevant pieces of information. Triple-check it for accuracy and hone it to the essentials that will have the greatest impact on your audience(s). A fact sheet is also handy for dealing with the media and for helping your spokespeople stay on message when they talk to the public.
5. *Develop Your Message.* Your message is a paragraph that provides the basic template for all your specific communications. Your message paragraph should be clear, compelling, and short, and it should do three basic things:
  - a. Give your audience a reason to care about your issue by appealing to their values and immediate concerns.
  - b. Describe a threat and who is responsible for the problem, if possible to identify – even broadly.
  - c. Provide a solution. Describe what action will address the need and threat. Whenever possible, give people something to do – an action that will allow them to respond to the threat.
6. *Use Language That Speaks To Your Audience.* Sometimes what is said isn't what our audience hears, because different audiences bring different perspectives on issues. For

example, a developer and an environmental activist probably have very different attitudes towards “urban sprawl.” Be sensitive to your audience.

7. *Be Ready With Anecdotes.* Having a human story that illustrates and amplifies your message is absolutely critical to a successful communications effort. It is essential that the human story be lined up before you begin implementing your strategy.

8. *Use Images.* Pictures tell a story, evoke emotions and appeal to values. They need to be front and center of an outreach/communications effort, and they should be chosen very carefully. An image that is too harsh may offend or be seen as extreme. Images should reflect the message, which will include a positive appeal to what your audience values and as well as an image that captures the problem you are addressing.

9. *When Using Facts, Be Specific.* Your message and images must be backed by specific facts. The public and journalists have become increasingly skeptical of information presented by advocates, so facts should be specific, not general, in order to be credible. For example, it is better to provide the number of acres of forest that will be lost due to a certain action, than simply to say “vast amounts of forest.” Simplify statistics; say “three out of four” instead of “75 percent” use facts that relate to people’s daily lives or experience, such as “the water we drink every day.”

10. *Repeat! Repeat! Repeat!* Do not assume everyone has heard the message, even if you are quoted in the media two or three times. If your core message is different from one week to the next, your audience will not comprehend any one thing. A diversity of message results in lack of clarity. Instead, you should decide on the most effective message and repeat it until it makes you crazy.

11. *Choose Appropriate Messengers.* Your choice of a messenger for an outreach/communications effort must depend on the message you want to convey and the audience who will receive it. One of the biggest mistakes an organization can make it to decide on a messenger before it knows the audience and message for communication. Messages are typically most credible when they come from people affected by an issue or problem, like a landowner or citizen. *The credibility of the messenger is just as important as the message itself.* For example, doctors and patients were the best messengers for information on health threats.

12. *Evaluate Your Results.* In order to determine if your goals and objectives were met, our results must be measured. The following are some measurement strategies:

a. *Attendance at Meetings, Programs and Events.* Goals for number of participants should be set as a benchmarks for evaluation. Whether the goal is exceeded or not,

#### Additional Language Tips

- “Land use” is a term that is still unclear and means conflicting things to people. Define it in manageable terms, talking about one issue at a time.
- Recognize that to most of your audience, growth is good. Talk about what is bad about unplanned or poorly planned growth and what’s good about smart growth or more effective, planned growth.
- Avoid jargon, such as: infill, brownfield, mixed-use or conversation easements.
- Green space and open space are terms that resonate with the public.
- “Better land use” is not a clear or positive term for many people.
- “Regulation” implies restriction and loss of rights.

you should determine why and identify opportunities for enhancement next time around. You should also analyze the makeup of attendees to determine if they were members of target audiences.

- b. *Surveys of Target Audiences.* Participants in your meetings, programs and events should be surveyed to determine their satisfaction with the event. Did it meet their expectations? Did they understand the mission? Were they moved to any kind of action? How did they hear about the program? Basic, one-page survey forms can be very useful in reporting your results and planning future programs.
- c. *Content Analysis of Media Coverage.* In addition to counting clips of print and broadcast coverage (quantitative), careful attention should be paid to the content of each clip (qualitative). Were your messages prominent? Were your goals communicated clearly and properly? Were the media outlets in which the coverage occurred appropriate for your target audiences?

# Getting The Message Out: Pathways To The Public

Adapted from People and Land's Grantee Communication Kit, November 2002

There is more than one way to reach any given audience, and a successful communications initiative usually involved multiple methods of outreach.

## Working With The Media

To reach your target audience, you'll want to target the media contacts you have, and think strategically about how to approach them. Start by identifying the journalists you want to reach, making sure the story you're pitching is newsworthy, and preparing yourself with professional communication materials.

## Creating Media Lists

The best way to begin developing a list of media contacts is to pay attention to who reports on issues relevant to yours. Then, you can supplement that list using an online sources such as [www.bacons.com](http://www.bacons.com). Most important, do your homework to get the correct contact information, and keep your media lists up-to-date.

Not every release you write should go to every contact on your media list. Think strategically about who would be interested in covering your story, and think creatively about how your story might be approached. For example, along with pitching a local agricultural reporter about your story, think about how the topic might be relevant to a business audience and pitch it to the business editor.

## First Contact: Getting To Know The Media

Ideally, you should introduce yourself to reporters covering your issues before you need to pitch to them. Send them background information, such as a media kit or fact sheet, to orient them to who you are and what your organization is doing. You may not hear back from journalists when they receive your kit, but in most cases, your information will be kept on file for later reference. Later when you contact journalists to pitch a story, remind them of the useful information kit you sent.

## Make Sure You Have News To Share

Before you start writing a press release, and before you pitch an idea to a journalist, ask yourself if your story fulfills at least three of the following:

- Something new, that no one has ever said or heard before,
- Something timely—yesterday's news is old news,
- Something that affects a large number of people,
- Something visual (for television or a photo opportunity),
- Something that centers around an event or happening,
- Something with a human interest angle,

- Something that is a variation of a theme already receiving media attention,
- Something unusual or ironic,
- Something that represents a threat or danger to the community,
- Something that involves a public figure, a celebrity or a well-known organization.

### **Pitching Your Story**

Most reporters have personal preferences for how they like to be contacted when being pitched a story. Ask them whether they prefer to receive information via mail, fax, e-mail, or phone.

- Make sure you have a news release or media advisor on hand before you call them. Most reporters need to check with colleagues and editors before working on an assignment. It's difficult to "sell" an idea internally without something in writing.
- Be available to reporters when you send information. If you send out a press release, be available to take calls from reporters on the date of the release and the following couple of days.
- As a rule, call reporters by their first names and relate to them as peers (unless you are dealing with someone who is renowned in some way). Do not be intimidated by reporters.
- Always be completely honest. Know the facts and stick to them. If you don't know the answer to a questions, admit it. Tell the reporter you will find the answer and call him or her back. Find out the reporter's deadline, and make sure to call back within that time frame.
- When being interviewed, avoid saying, "no comment." Explain confidentiality issues or refer the reporter to another spokesperson, if appropriate.
- Do not talk "off the record." There is no such thing.
- Feel free to make friends with reporters, but always honor their professionalism first. Never take advantage of a friendship by asking them to write a story as a "favor."
- Always remember to thank reporters when they write a story on your organization or quote you in an article.

### **Earning Coverage In The Editorial Section**

One of the most effective ways to educate the public about land use and agricultural issues is by engaging the editorial section of the local newspaper. Editorials, columns, and "op-eds" that appear in the local paper are likely to be read by key audiences.

### **Editorial Board Visits**

Every newspaper has an editorial board that convenes to decide the publication's position on issues of the day. This board, which may consist of editorial writers, editors, and key reporters, regularly invites issue experts, citizen groups, and community organizations to educate its members on issues of importance to the community. To arrange an editorial board meeting,

contact the editorial page editor by phone to explain the newsworthy topic and then try to schedule a meeting. The editor might set up a meeting right away or ask for more information. When going to the meeting, take the best spokesperson, along with anyone else who will speak positively and knowledgeably to the importance of the issue. Also bring along pertinent background information to leave behind.

### **Write A Letter To The Editor**

Don't wait for local reporters to feature the issue in a story or column. Look for newspaper articles that related to the issue, and then write a letter to the editor in response. Letters should be short, timely, and to the point. Enhance the letter including relevant facts and statistics. Check out the "letters to the editor" section of local newspapers to get a sense of what kinds of letters are published.

### **Compose Your Own Column: Op-Eds**

Start the discussion about issues related to land use issues by writing an op-ed (opposite of the editorial page) for one of the local papers. An op-ed can reintroduce the issues to the community and demonstrate the important work the organization is doing as well as what they are trying to accomplish. Requirements vary from paper to paper, so before starting to write, check with the op-ed editor for interest in the subject and length requirements.

### **Supporting Your Earned Media Efforts**

#### **Public Service Announcements**

PSA's look like paid advertisements and commercials, but in this case, the media outlet donates the time or space to help organizations spread socially relevant messages.

If they are created effectively and with the audience in mind, PSAs can be great message carriers. You can produce and design the PSA yourself, but if you have no experience, seek the advice of a professional who specializes in PSAs. Even though the time or space is donated, don't waste it by producing an ad that is ineffective or irrelevant to the audience.

The downside of PSAs is that competition for unpaid advertising space can be fierce. Most outlets have a PSA director who chooses and places PSAs, and some smaller outlets use their advertising director for this role. The best bet is to make the appeal in person, however, if it is not possible to make personal calls, send the PSAs with a cover letter to the contact person emphasizing why the message is important. Then follow up with a phone call.

PSAs can be printed on grocery bags, posted on neighborhood bulletin board, placed in theater playbills, and shown at movie theaters, just to name a few options. Think creatively about where to place messages.

### **Brochure and Support Materials**

#### **Google Alerts: An Innovative Way of Tracking Media Coverage**

We've all heard of the Internet search engine Google, but you may not have heard of their free media tracking service called, Google Alerts.

To try it go to:

<https://www.google.com/alerts/signin?hl=en>

Click on "Sign up now". It asks for an email, etc. and then takes you to a screen where you can type in whatever you want it to search for, and the frequency of reports (daily, as soon as something is posted, etc).

You can search for key words such as "United Growth," your last name, MSU Extension, etc.

You will receive a list of hits via email. The tool can only find media that is posted on-line, so if your local paper isn't published on-line, be sure to read that in hard copy format. This service also does not track newsletter articles, which are valuable media outlets as well.

Brochures and support materials need to be targeted to specific audiences with a goal or purpose in mind. Consider these tips for writing great brochures:

- Explain your issue in simple, compelling terms. Don't assume the audience knows all the acronyms, jargon and history.
- Keep major messages in front of you while writing the brochure. The brochure should use and support these messages, as should all written materials.
- Use specific facts, figures, and statistics to support arguments, but be sure to cite sources. Charts and graphs can help convey information quickly in a brochure.
- Use photographs or drawings of people to put a human face on the issue.
- Give specific examples of what the target audience (zoning officials, local residents, etc.) can do to take action.
- Be sure to include ways in which people can make a donation or become involved. Include a form for donors to request more information.
- Always include contact information: mailing address, phone number, e-mail and Web site addresses.
- Remember that less is more. Writing should be tight and to the point.
- A clean, uncluttered layout makes information easy to find. White space, rules, and careful use of color make organization easy.
- Don't fully justify text. Fully justifying text can lead to awkward spacing problems. Spaces between words may be too big, and other lines may be too scrunched.
- Use italics sparingly—for book/magazine titles and occasional emphasis *only*.
- Repeating elements and colors adds continuity to design, but don't go overboard. Too many art elements can interfere with the text.
- Use sidebars and pull quotes to emphasize important information.
- Get more color for the printing dollar. Tints of color and screens of black can fool the eye into seeing more than two colors.
- U. S. Postal Service regulations specify that most mailing pieces over 5 inches and under 6 ½ inches on the horizontal address length, and under 3 ounces in weight, get the same rate as normal business mail.

### **Be Creative In Distributing Materials**

Think about when and where to distribute your brochure. We have all been at public events where people just hand out brochures. How many times have you actually kept and read them?

Distribute brochures and other materials where there is a captive audience: for example, before a concert or lecture.

### **Organizing**

No news coverage will replace networks of people who understand the issue and the decision making process and are actively involved. The fundamental statement on organizing is attributed to Cesar Chavez, but every good organizer knows it: first talk to one person; then talk to another person; then talk to another, and so on.

The strategy is to build local organizations, which fosters power and influence at the community level. Building organization is critical, because it develops relationships. A good organizer not only introduces new information, but also, cultivates knowledge and skills in the local political process, access to decision making arenas, and a sense of shared ownership in the decisions.

### **Other Means Of Communication**

There are all kinds of other ways to reach target audiences besides the tactics outlined here—public speaking engagements, community presentations, direct mail letters and newsletters, listservs, Web sites, and others. Think creatively about how to communicate about your project. Draw on your strengths, learn about what has worked well for other grantees, and challenge yourself!

### **Writing For The Media**

#### **Media Releases**

Media releases (also called press releases or news releases) are an important vehicle for communicating with media outlets. Media releases are written:

- To issue a statement or take a stand on an issue that is already in the news,
- To provide background information or to supplement late-breaking news,
- To announce other news, such as the findings of a study, results of a poll, recommendations in a report, or a special event

Media releases always include who, what, when, where, and why, and should be no longer than one or two pages. If you need to, supplement releases with a fact sheet—a one-page bulleted document explaining the background on the issue or event.

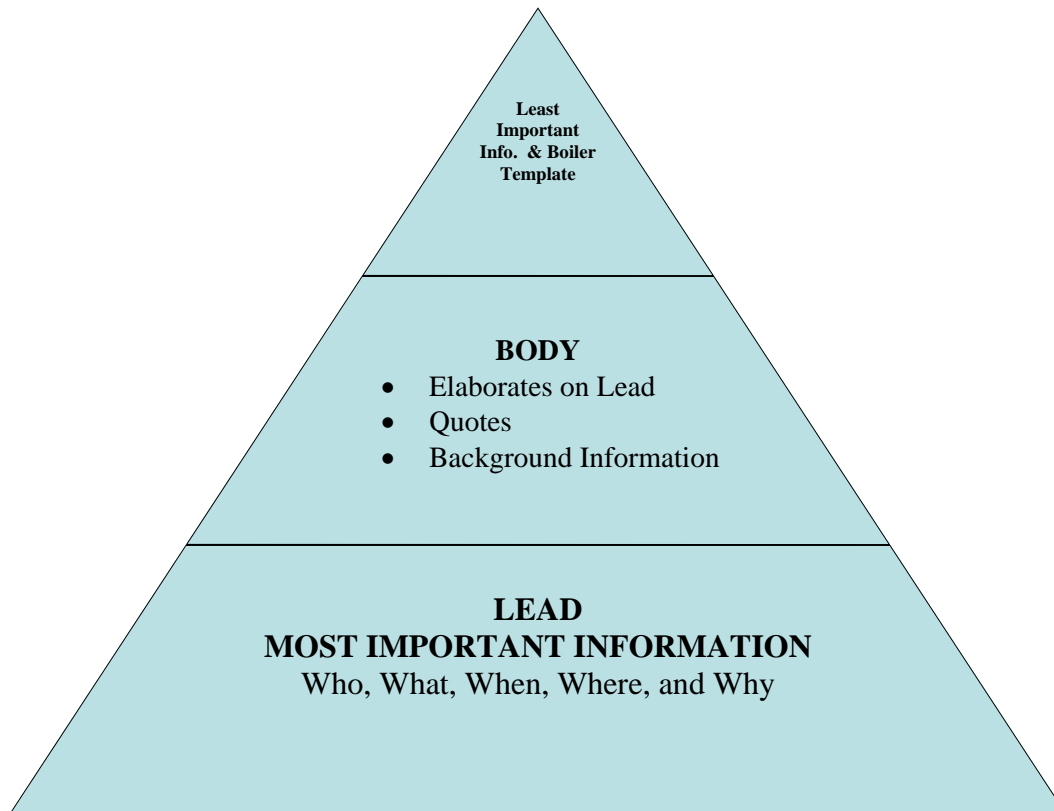
#### **Format And Style**

You have a better chance of getting your release read by the media if it is formatted and written properly.

See media release template on page 130.

- Use your organization's letterhead.
- List a contact person and his or her office and home phone numbers in the upper right corner of the page.
- Write "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE" in the upper left corner of the page.
- Title the release in 10 words or less.
- Summarize the most important point in the first sentence—show why your story is timely, relevant, and worth reading.
- Use the [inverted] pyramid to write your release.
- Write in the active voice and use short sentences and paragraphs.
- Use quotes to make an emotional point or state an opinion.
- Include background information about your organization in the last paragraph. This is known as a boilerplate; it may include the major purpose of your organization, campaigns, membership size, and nonprofit status.
- Be brief—one to two pages.

- Type “MORE” at the bottom of every page if your release is longer than one page. Type “###” at the end of the final page.
- Proofread your release. There should be not typos or misspellings; also double-check to make sure names, dates, places, numbers, and quotes are accurate.



### **Media Advisories**

A media advisory is like a short news release, but rather than provide an entire news story, the media advisory is used to alert the media to an event or photo opportunity. A media advisory clearly states who, what, when, where, and why, and enough information to tell reporters where they should go and whom they should call if they want to cover the story. The same rules of format for releases apply to advisories; however, an advisory is one page only.

See example of media advisory on page 131.

### **Media Kits**

The purpose of a media kit (also called a background kit) is to help give a reporter background information and context for doing a story about your project or issue. You should always have media kits on hand for press conferences, media interviews, and events.

A media kit can be as simple as a two-pocket folder with your organization's logo on it, containing:

- A history of the issue or project you're describing.
- A brief background about your organization.
- Facts and figures about the issue or project, including reliable statistics and other "hard" facts.
- References to other sources of information about your issue.
- Past news clippings or press releases related to your issue in your community and nationally.
- Contact information for your organization and short bios of staff members who can be contacted as "experts" for comment.
- Photographs, charts, and other graphics to help demonstrate your points.

**Since facts and trends are constantly changing, update your kit at least once a year.**

# Media Release Template

[Organization Logo]

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**CONTACT: Name, Organization  
Telephone number**

**[Name of Organization] Receives \$XXXX Grant to Promote [Issue] in [County]**

DATE-CITY, MI – [Name of Organization] was recently awarded \$XXXX to [brief description of project goal] , by [funding source], a foundation for organization advocating land use education and decision making in Michigan.

[Quote from executive director or project manager about the importance of your project, the positive outcomes expected, and/or how your grant ties in to the overall mission of the funding source.]

[One of two paragraphs summarizing your project and its background.]

More information about [ name of project] is available at [web site or phone number.]

[Funding source’s boilerplate language. They usually require that this be included when you receive your grant.]

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# Example Media Advisory

[Organization Logo]

## Media Advisory

### “Growth Management, Urban Equity and Land Protection”

- WHEN:** Wednesday, October 3, at 10 a.m.
- WHERE:** Bengel Wildlife Center in Bath, Michigan
- WHO:** People and Land (PAL)  
and the Michigan Land Use Funders (MLUF)
- WHAT:** This is a statewide land use networking conference to promote discussion among nonprofit leaders about land use reform, farmland protection, urban revitalization and related issues.

Panelists at the conference include:

Jim Barrett, Michigan Chamber of Commerce  
Executive Director

Dr. David Skole, Michigan Land Use Resource  
Project Researcher

Bill Rustem, PAL Project Manager and  
Senior Vice President of Public Sector Consultants

Pat Noonan, CEO of the Conservation Fund

The program will last until 3:15 p.m., with a legislative reception at the Lansing City Club from 3:30 – 5:30 p.m.

Lunch is included. Please RSVP to Jennifer Wolf at 800-XXX-XXXX.

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#### Contacts:

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