

**DEMOCRACY ★ FOR ★ AMERICA**   
**CAMPAIGN ACADEMY**

## Chapter 6

# Communications

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# Developing Your Campaign’s Message

## What is your campaign about?

### Theme

The theme is the overarching rationale for the campaign. The theme answers the questions “Why you? Why Now?” Every message, regardless of the target goes back to the general theme of the campaign. Your theme shouldn’t seem hollow; it should have meaning to the voter. Challengers and incumbents have inherently different themes.

The **challenger’s** theme argues for change.

- Ronald Reagan, 1980: “Are you better off today than you were four years ago? Every issue, every response in the Reagan campaign went back to this question. Whether it was a question on crime, jobs, or national security, the campaign’s message would implicitly or explicitly invoke this theme.
- Howard Dean’s “Take our country back” implied the need for change in a way that resonated with those who felt the country was going in the wrong direction – a classic challenger position.

The **incumbent’s** theme argues for continuity.

- Ronald Reagan, 1984: “It’s morning in America!”
- Like any other incumbent, Reagan focused on the issues which Americans could be proud of. When focusing on the positive becomes difficult, a theme stressing continuity is just as important. From Abraham Lincoln in 1864 declaring, “We must not change horses midstream...” to George W. Bush’s invocations of terror, the incumbent must present to the voter a rationale to stay the course.

<b>Examples:</b>	<u>Race</u>	<u>Democratic Message</u>
	• Carter vs. Ford	▪ Change
	• Carter vs. Reagan	▪ Continuity
	• Mondale vs. Reagan	▪ Change
	• Dukakis vs. Bush	▪ Change
	• Clinton vs. Bush	▪ Change
	• Clinton vs. Dole	▪ Continuity
	• Gore vs. Bush	▪ Continuity
	• Kerry vs. Bush	▪ Change
	• Obama vs. McCain	▪ Change

### Message

A message is more specific, more detailed, and more focused than the campaign theme. It’s a basic idea that you should be able to express in less than 30 words (27 to be more precise, and we’ll see that later).

Messages can be targeted to particular audiences, tailored for common responses, and changed up as the campaign goes along. Messages are strongest when they go beyond the simple “I support X issue” and start getting to the values the candidate shares with those whom he or she wants to represent. Regardless of the specific message, all messages must consistently reinforce the theme of the campaign.

**If You Can Master Message, You Master Media –  
If You Can Master Media, You Can Win Your Campaign.**

## The Message Box

Our messages don't exist in a vacuum. We wage campaigns because we are challenged or are challenging an opposing idea or candidate. We need to be able to anticipate our opponent's messages and prepare ourselves to respond and bring the conversation back to our own message.

A tool we use to map this rhetorical landscape is the Message Box. The Message Box is a visual representation of the potential messages from both parties in the campaign. It details what we say about ourselves, what we say about our opponents, what our opponents say about themselves, and what they say about us – covering the campaign from each possible angle. It looks like this:

<b>What we say about ourselves/ our plan</b>	<b>What they say about themselves/ their plan</b>
<b>What we say about them/ their plan</b>	<b>What they say about us/ our plan</b>

To help us refine our message, we plot the general messages in the appropriate boxes. To give an idea of what this would look like, we'll fill out an example using a major issue in the upcoming legislative session.

<i>“Everyone deserves to have a doctor”</i>	<i>“The free market allows Vermonters to choose the best options”</i>
<i>“The cost of the current system is spiraling out of control”</i>	<i>“Socialized health care leads to more government bureaucracy”</i>

## How to Use the Message Box

Going through this exercise early on in the campaign will help you anticipate and think through your strengths, weaknesses, potential opportunities, and potential threats (**SWOT** – strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats). In addition to helping you refine your own message, the message box allows you start plotting defenses and planning attacks beforehand. You will have to respond to your opponent. Having a message box allows you to respond in a way that brings it back to your message.

Because you can anticipate what your opponent will say, you can pre-empt his/her message. If, for example, you anticipate a campaign where your opponent will emphasize his own experience, you might talk about the need for a fresh perspective and somehow attempt to paint your opponent’s time in office as a liability. At all times, the message of your campaign should work to bring the dialogue back to your side of the column – back to “what we say about....”

The message box keeps us grounded and prevents the campaign staffers from becoming an isolated echo chamber. This exercise is useful to start off a campaign, but don’t just let it sit there. Update it every week. If your campaign is switching to a different message or if your opponent is attacking you from a different angle, you’ll be ready. A good message box will predict how the campaigns will be defined if you control the message (first column), or how the campaigns will be defined if your opponent controls the message (second column).

Exercise: Complete a message box

Try one out for yourself. Write out a message for an issue, campaign, or local Party

What we say about: _____        	What they say about: _____        
What we say about: _____        	What they say about: _____        

## Message in the Field

A campaign will spend the majority of its resources getting the candidate’s message out to targeted voters. Your message box gives you a general idea of what people are saying. Now we have to make sure the message we’re using is getting through to our audience. Make sure the message you are developing sticks to the following criteria.

Good messages are **CONCISE**

- Go directly to the point. Avoid complicated syllogisms. It’s a message, not a thesis.

Good messages are **CLEAR**

- Use stark language. Leave no doubt about whose side you’re on. This is most effectively done when you base your message on values.

Good messages are **CONSISTENT**

- Repeat, repeat, repeat. Voters are barraged with a steady stream of conflicting information every day. Having multiple messages dilutes your ability to reach the voter. Make sure your earned media reflect what is said in your paid media. Consistency and repetition reinforce the message. Consistency and repetition reinforce the message.

Good messages are **CONVINCING**

- Never, never, never lie. No short-term advantage gained through deception is worth the loss of credibility that occurs when caught in a lie. But being convincing is more than just telling the truth. You risk your credibility by talking about issues people simply do not care about. Is your message relevant to the people hearing it?

Good messages are **CONTRASTIVE**

- Your job is to draw a distinction between you and the opposing candidate or issue position. Your job is to draw a favorable contrast. People can not decide if the alternatives are unclear or unimportant to them. Again, contrasting your values – why and how you came to support/ oppose an issue – is more effective than your stance on a particular issue.

## Another Note on Repetition... Another Note on Repetition

Staff, volunteers, activists, and other political junkies will notice a campaign constantly repeating a message. It can become so repetitious that people can recite it in their sleep. By the time the staff gets sick of a message, that message is only just beginning to register in the minds of voters. The vast majority of the population does not make following the nuances of a campaign a priority in their lives. They are inundated with messages. The only messages which get through are those which adhere to the above criteria and which are constantly present in the voters’ lives. Voters will only occasionally notice a political message and you must make sure yours is the one they notice.

Corporate marketers use the ‘700 impressions’ rule. A consumer must see the same thing 700 times before it alters their buying behavior. The most successful marketers are so omnipresent that our use of their brand is unconsciously emblazoned in our thinking. How many times have you used the brand “Kleenex” when you meant the product “facial tissue?”

**Your campaign must deliver its message multiple times before the target voter has noticed it even once.**

### Does Repetition work?

Complete these phrases:

“Milk, does a body \_\_\_\_.”

“Beef, It’s what’s for \_\_\_\_.”

“Pork, the other \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_.”

Corporate advertising has used the steady repetition of simple phrases to cut through the clutter of everyday life. We know these old phrases today because of repetition.

## The Ideal Message Format: 27 – 9 – 3

Now that you have an idea on how to develop your message, how do you best convey this message to the people? Remember that campaigns are a series of communications. You have to find a good way to start that conversation, a way to catch people’s attention. Too often our messages get lost on people because we assume that other people are lining up to hear what we say; we forget that we need to give them a good reason to listen to us first. Instead, we bombard them with dry, long-winded imperatives.

Fitting our message into the 27 – 9 – 3 format allows us to get our foot in the door. What is 27 – 9 – 3?

### 27 words • 9 seconds • 3 points

You have 27 words in 9 seconds using three quick points. The 27 – 9 – 3 method forces you to use clear, concise language. It allows for easy repetition.

Newspaper stories will often include a direct quote in the first two or three paragraphs of any political story. Television and radio have an even stricter limitation: time. The real limitation of finite column inches and finite air time forces the reporter to look for a concise quote which encapsulates the subject’s position. If the speaker wants to control what is written and attributed to him or her, the speaker must acknowledge this reality. Successful speakers use the 27 – 9 – 3 to get their ‘foot in the door’ and hook listeners and will continue to use the 27 – 9 – 3 for any point that the speaker wants quoted or remembered.

### Examples:

*Neighbor-to-neighbor/ casual conversation:*

**“So, Jane, you keep supporting these Democrats. Why? Why should I vote for a Democrat?”**

**“Right and wrong, Joe. It’s wrong to deprive kids of health care, fight this misguided war, put government in my personal business. Isn’t it time for what’s right?”**

*Justifying an established position:*

**Global Warming is a threat to all Americans. It will affect our family farms, raise our property insurance rates, and alter animal habitats. We’re seeing it now.**

*Promoting your platform:*

**“I think it’s time to shake things up: Time to support our schools, time to clean out City Hall, and time to bring jobs back to Anytown.”**

### 27-9-3 Exercises: Try these out.

Why do you deserve a raise?

What is the Democratic Agenda?

What is so great about Social Security?

# Staying On Message

## Why Stay on Message?

Maintaining good message discipline requires three things: Repeat the message, repeat the message, and stay on message. Constantly repeating your message is easy enough, but staying on message is a learned skill. Keeping your campaign on message is the best way to reach your audience in a manner over which you have control. The worst communications gaffes nearly always result from an undisciplined speaker. No matter how wonderful the candidate or issue, straying from your message will open the door to distortion - or worse, lack of coverage.

Those who stay on message control the message. The media can only report what it sees and hears. If you provide nothing but your message, it will repeat only your message. Message discipline has a vastly greater effect on what we see and hear in the media than any partisan or corporate bias.

## Answering vs. Responding

The most likely – and most dangerous – place where we stray from our message is when someone is deliberately pushing us away from it. Assertive reporters may come in with their own angle or their own agenda. But no matter what the reporters’ angle, they can only quote what you say.

The common pitfall for an undisciplined campaign or candidate is to answer whatever question is asked of them. This puts control of your message in the hands of someone who does not have your election as their goal. All of your answers to any question should tie back into the current message of the campaign. If the question is completely off-base, that’s fine, you’re just going to talk about your message. It’s fine to say “I can’t comment on that right now.” Even confessing that you simply don’t know the answer is better than making a statement with an unprepared answer. Often the reporter will ask a loaded question, one that assumes an untrue or unconfirmed premise. The best response is to return to your message.

Remember, it’s your campaign. You are campaigning for a reason and the people deserve to hear what that reason is.

**“Ugh! This guy just keeps saying the same thing over and over. People are going to get tired of this.”**

Nope, not really. Most people aren’t tired of it yet because, unlike you, most people haven’t even heard it.

**“Ugh! He’s not even answering the question. People are going to see right through this.”**

What’s to see through? People are going to see and hear only the message of the campaign. It’s not evasion, it’s focus.

**“Well it looks like evasion and it doesn’t look good.”**

It doesn’t look like anything. Few people watch the press conferences. Most people see the snippets which result when people actually say something. We can control these moments.

## Stay On Message Exercise:

“My dog has three legs.”

This exercise is simple. One person, the spokesperson, is charged with a simple message. Others in the activity are charged with getting the spokesperson off message, to fluster and distract. The message is “My dog has three legs.”

If time allows, take turns and switch out the spokesperson until each person in the group has had a turn fielding questions.

## Sample Dialogue

R: “Why are we here today?”

S: “We’re here because **my dog has three legs.**”

R: “Mm, hm. Don’t you think there more important issues to discuss?”

S: “The most important thing for this community right now is that **my dog has three legs.**”

R: “Given what we know about pre-war Iraq intelligence, where do you stand on the war?”

S: “Well, in my neighborhood, people are concerned about **my three-legged dog.**”

R: “But the American people want to know why we went to war on faulty intelligence.”

S: “I don’t know much about that, but my neighbors are asking whv **mv dog has three legs.**”

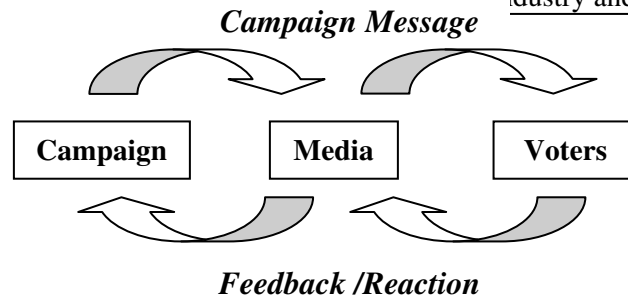
# Working with the Media

## What is “the media”? And why do we need it?

For our purposes, the media is an amplifier. A campaign is a form of communication, a conversation with the voter. Campaigns use many methods of reaching the voter – canvassing, phone calls, and direct mail, for example. The media is an existing communications infrastructure which already reaches nearly all of our targeted voters. So we use the media as a means to get our message out to large numbers of voters.

### The Dictionary Definition:

*n. pl. me·di·a (-d-) or me·di·ums* - A means of mass communication, such as newspapers, magazines, radio, or television. **media** (*used with a sing. or pl. verb*) The group of journalists and others who constitute the communications industry and profession.



## Media as the ‘Middle Box’ – The media as mediator

The media is the campaign’s bridge to the voter. Since TV, radio, print, and online media are already consumed by the voter, our task is to use these existing bridges to deliver our message to the voter. You can craft a compelling message, but it means nothing if it fails to reach the voter. It’s not always easy. Sometimes voters just aren’t paying attention. Sometimes the media itself, the ‘middle box,’ is difficult to master. Campaigns divide media exposure into categories: paid media and earned media.

### Paid Media

The ads you see –TV, radio, print, and online – are all paid media. This space costs money – usually quite a lot, but it’s your message exactly the way you want it. The expense depends on the specific medium and varies by target demographic, media market, or circulation. A large campaign can spend as much as 80% of its budget on media buys.

Most campaigns, especially local and down-ballot campaigns, do not spend a great deal on paid broadcast or print media. In smaller districts, it might not make sense to pay for broadcast media that covers an area much larger than the district itself. For campaigns that do not have a large budget for paid media, it is better to concentrate on one medium at a time until each medium is saturated sufficiently. For example, a campaign might invest in radio to the point where it is ubiquitous over the radio waves before buying any television time. This keeps you from diluting your exposure and getting buried in all the other noise.

### Earned Media

A good campaign gets excellent media exposure at very little cost. Earned media is less predictable, more labor intensive, and takes time. The advantage of earned media is third party validation – something you cannot buy.

**Just don’t call it “free media.” We call it *earned* media because you have to work for it!**

Getting press earns you credibility among every group of people important to a campaign. Donors need to hear about your campaign and know their investment is viable before giving. Fundraisers should have press clips ready to present to donors. Endorsers would hesitate to lend their name to an unknown candidate. Having earned media is an important barometer even for other journalists – everyone wants to cover the hot story. Finally, the voters’ most memorable exposure to your campaign comes from the news stories they see and hear. This manual section focuses on earning media coverage for your campaign.

# What's Out There – Different Kinds of Earned Media

## Print Media

Print media is still the most important source of political news for people who care about politics. It covers political news more comprehensively than any other medium. Most importantly, stories originating from the paper are picked up by other news media, but rarely do other news media break a story that print later picks up. The print media sets the tone for how your campaign will be covered – therefore, communications staffers should pitch to newspapers first.

While other media outlets' reporters may cover a broad range of topics, a newspaper's reporters cover 'beats,' or areas of specialization. A campaign pitches a story to a reporter and if s/he likes it, the reporter will pitch it to the editor who will approve or disapprove of the story.

Whereas television and radio media are limited by time constraints, print media is limited by space constraints. Editors decide how much space each story gets and usually do so by morning. Editors and reporters meet mid-morning to divvy out assignments.

Print media comes in different forms. The major **daily papers** are the largest, most influential forms of print media. In a large urban area the daily (or dailies) have large readership and often multiple political beat reporters. Small town papers have limited resources, but are likely to be more influential to the residents of that town than any other outlet.

Most rural areas have a **weekly paper**, instead of a daily. These papers are widely read by the communities they serve. They are also understaffed and eager to take press releases and statements from newsmakers, and often run entire portions of your release as the story.

A different kind of weekly is the urban, **alternative weekly paper** – City Paper, City Pages, Metro, etc. These papers view themselves differently than 'establishment' papers and are (usually) very politically charged, admittedly biased, and progressive. The political stories can actually be longer in these papers and the reporters frequently look for a fresh and unique angle not covered by the major daily.

You can use **neighborhood** or **suburban weeklies** to target local communities for very little cost. These papers take their role very seriously and will be eager to take on a political story. Many are run out of the same office and owned by the same person/ company.

### Don't forget specialty press!

Papers covering a specific constituency have tremendous influence over smaller, targeted segments of the population. Some papers cover specific professional interests, others cover ethnic and racial populations, many are written in different languages. These papers – especially the labor, racial/ethnic, and LGBT targeted papers – serve as vital connections to each community. Outreach to these papers is appreciated by the groups, and often expected. This can be a key component in your targeting strategy.

## Radio Media

Radio stations break down into three categories: News, entertainment, and talk radio. Many stations are combinations of the three. They can all be important in your media strategy. And they all need one thing: sound. This may seem obvious, but do not underestimate this need – the more quotes and commentary your campaign can provide, the better off you will be. You can fill this need by providing radio feeds, actualities, and live or live-to-tape interviews (explained later). Radio producers would like nothing more than a library of sound bites of your candidate. The more they have; the more they will play.

Unlike newspapers, radio news decisions are generally made by one person in charge of the news division - the news director. Have your candidate make a scheduled drop-by to meet the news director. This can also be a good opportunity to tape an interview or make a few statements for broadcast. Unlike print media, radio interviewers typically dislike seeing the interviewee read from a statement in the studio (you can also call in for a taped or live

interview, but make it sound natural). The news director’s job starts very early in the morning (5–6 a.m.) – earlier than print media. Have the candidate wake up early to call in for interviews and sound clips, and you may find the candidate on the air throughout the day. Some larger news stations have reporters they will send out to cover major local events, but your best contact will remain the news director.

Entertainment radio stations will often have a news director as well. This person usually compiles stories from the wire and plays what few radio feeds are available. If the station is open to reporting political news (some are not, and need to be persuaded), they will be happy to have material of their own to air.

Talk radio stations need guests in studio and newsmakers calling in. Often, talk radio stations will have a full-time scheduler/producer for this purpose. This is the person you need to pitch and get to know. Much like the urban alternative weeklies, talk radio usually has a political slant and is not afraid to advertise its own bias. Unlike the urban alternative weeklies, radio talk show biases are frequently conservative. The most aggressively conservative shows should be avoided – they are more experienced at making people look like fools than the candidate is at not looking like a fool. Your candidate has better ways to spend his or her time. However, do not leave out talk radio entirely. Many persuadable voters listen to talk radio. Do your research and don’t shy away from the more civil talk radio outlets.

Have your supporters monitor the talk shows and provide them with talking points on message with your campaign. If your candidate’s name or issues are mentioned, your supporters will be ready to call in. Better yet, the radio show will almost always allow a candidate to call in and respond.

### Television Media

Local campaigns must face two realities when it comes to television media. First, television news coverage is undeniably important. The single greatest source from which Americans get their news is their own local evening news broadcasts. Second, television news, even more than other major media, is acutely driven by ratings and what the news director believes people want to see. The news director usually believes that most people do not pay attention to politics until right before the election, but that most people will always pay attention to crime, car chases and scandals. Ideally, your campaign is involved in none of these.

Since early coverage can boost a campaign’s profile, the campaign’s communications director will need to be persuasive and creative with the television news directors and their staff. Your main contact at most news station will be the assignment editor – the person who decides who covers what. The assignment editor meets with the managing news editor (who has the ultimate say), in the morning. Unless a major news event suddenly needs coverage, the day’s television news coverage is decided largely in the morning.

Television is the most visual of all media. Just as radio media needs sound, television needs compelling visuals. Car chases and crime scenes appear on television news so often because it is news you can see. Local news doesn’t cover legislative sessions as much partly because the visual is long, boring, and fails to tell a quick story. If a candidate wants to break into this medium, the campaign must always consider what the story looks like. The visuals should fit the message. Social Security press events can be held at senior centers, education events held at schools, etc.

#### **“Hello caller, that’s a good question...”**

It’s always a good idea to have a few friendly voices ready to call in. Radio talk shows often have their own axe to grind, but will often go with a question from a caller. It’s a good way to stay on message. Just remember, calls are ID’d and questions are screened, so be smart about having supporters call in.

#### **Television is visual.**

When the environmental movement found it difficult to get news coverage of President Bush’s so-called “Healthy Forests” initiative, they got creative. Groups held “21 chain-saw” salutes all over the country. News coverage and general public awareness increased dramatically.

Some of the most powerful visuals are simple statements. A group opposing coal power pollution staged a press conference at a public park with young people in the foreground, and a large, billowing smokestack clearly visible in the background.

### Online Media

Defying skeptics and turning conventional wisdom on its head, Governor Howard Dean showed the political establishment that the Internet can be a major political tool. As we'll learn in the Online Organizing section of this manual, the Internet is not a standalone strategy, but a component of a larger plan. The same is true of using the Internet in earned media. Because of the rapidly growing influence of online media, such as blogs, this manual has a separate section on online organizing elsewhere.

In short, you should look at using the Internet as another way of getting your story out to the public. A key distinction between online media and offline is that with offline media, viewer and listeners tune in and listen. Online media must actively be sought and so the exposure is far more limited.

Your campaign can maintain its own blog to develop a community of online activists. Once this community is active, and you are reasonably sure people get the campaign's message, steer the press toward the site as a way of getting some 'unvarnished' campaign perspective. If the press feel like the blog is organic and a good way to add perspective to a breaking or developing story, it may go there for background info.

Remember that your campaign blog is coming from your campaign's perspective. Let that perspective shine through. There's no use pretending that it is objective reporting. Your blog should be exciting and have personality and candor (on-message candor). One of the best ways to keep people coming back is by updating and posting many times a day. Link liberally to other blogs and websites your supporters (and potential supporters) might like. This might drive up traffic to your site, but be careful not to link to anyone with whom you would not want to be associated.

You can also get your story out on major national blogs like DailyKos and MyDD. In addition to actually buying ad space, you can write up online diaries or post to the main blog. If the story is compelling, it will stick and people will talk/blog about it. Taking off on the national blogs might build you some buzz, but is unlikely to make a major splash in a local race, so consider this when investing effort in national blogs.

Traditional media outlets often have online versions of their stories with expanded coverage. Typically, the online version is entirely dependant on newsgathering from the traditional media outlet, so you should still pitch to the beat reporter or news director instead of the webmaster.

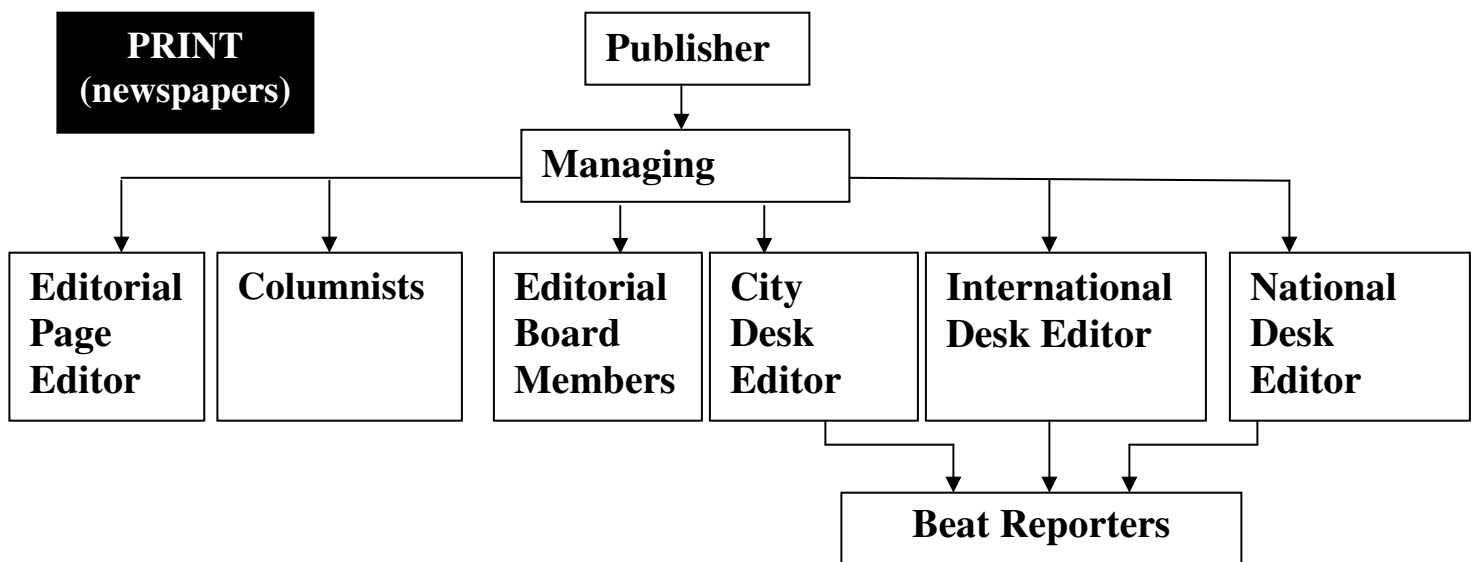
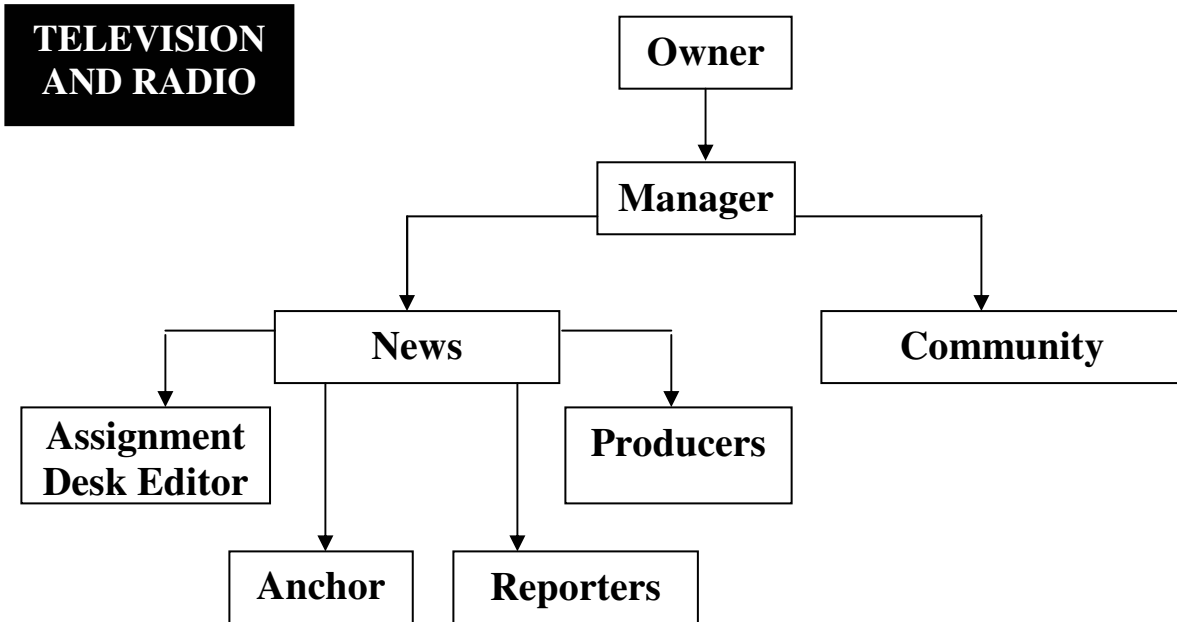
## **Newsires**

Newsires do not reach the public directly, but they are an extremely important media target. Newsires compile news articles, press releases, and media event schedules for other news organizations to use. Their role is to provide media outlets with whole articles, background for stories, and an idea of what's coming next. Most wire services are divided into state and local bureaus and, like a newspaper, most have their own reporters. Because they provide an invaluable service to media outlets, they should become a priority for you. Once a story gets picked up on the wire, it's there for any newspaper to run with.

Probably the most valuable service the wire services provide is the 'daybook.' This is a daily listing of any and all the possible news events in the media market. Newspapers, radio stations, and local television news organizations check this daybook at the beginning of each day and incorporate the listings into their outlets' schedule. Getting your event in the daybook can get you media at your event.

Major newsires, like the *Associated Press* (AP), are present in almost every media market. Others such as *Reuters* and *United Press International* (UPI) are found in larger cities. Don't forget to look for local and regional newsires in your area. Some statewide newspapers provide their own wire service for smaller papers across the state, making it far more important to get your article in that paper.

# ORGANIZATIONAL CHART FOR MEDIA OUTLETS



Media outlets are run by networks of people doing different tasks. You should be familiar with the different roles individuals play in the media so that you can target the correct person with your story or message. The roles of the various editors of newspapers are usually available on the editorial page. If you need to know which reporter covers which beat, just call the outlet and ask.

# Building Your Media List – Do Your Research

The first step to reaching out to the media and getting covered is to know whom to contact and what to expect. Campaigns and organizations typically keep up-to-date media contact lists, sometimes called ‘press lists’ or ‘press books.’ Your media contact list is more than just a series of names and phone numbers; it is your first resource for media outreach. Your media list should give you all the information you need to start up or continue a relationship with a targeted employee of any media outlet. This includes:

## Information on each outlet:

- Type of outlet (print, radio, etc.)
- Name of outlet
- Circulation/listening audience/viewership/site traffic for the outlet (in the district)
- Special constituencies (Latinos, GLBTs, labor, small town, etc.)
- Submission preferences (do they accept radio feeds, do they prefer emailed releases, etc)
- Deadlines/flow of the day
- Owner and other outlets are owned and/or managed by this person.
- Newsroom/Assignment desk contact info (for generic earned media questions/requests)
- Advertising and sales desk contact info (for generic paid media questions/requests)
- Physical Address

## Information about each reporter or editor:

- Beat(s)
- Name
- Phones (direct work, cell, etc.)
- Fax (direct to news room)
- Email
- Deadlines
- Supervising editor/manager
- Past articles (or editorials) written about relevant topics
- Record of recent contact with the campaign.
- Other useful notes (“loves Yankees games,” “drinks decaf,” “new to the beat”)

You can figure out most of this information before your first contact. Much of this information is available online and nearly all of it is attainable by calling the front desk. Some items will understandably take time to figure out. Regardless, researching your district’s media early on will make life easier throughout the campaign. Treat this early information gathering as a serious list-building task for the communications team, and add this information to a dedicated database and binder.

Rapid response hinges on your ability to use this information quickly and efficiently, so make sure you have as much information as possible. Keep this data neatly organized and update frequently.

As with most campaign list-building, check with those who came before you. Your local Party or previous campaigns have presumably done this before. If neither the Party nor past campaigns are a reliable resource, check with progressive organizations. Any group doing serious work with the media will have a press list.

Using past experiences of others as a resource will save you time, but it is not a shortcut. Go over each of the given outlets and reporters and verify these contacts. Most likely, many will have changed or are not applicable to you. More importantly, just because you have the contact information does not mean you have the relationship. This takes time and energy to build.

Reporters change their beats, move to different outlets, or leave their jobs entirely on a fairly rapid basis. Update often.

Just because you obtained access to an organization’s press list does not necessarily mean you’ll need the same contacts. An environmental group may have different contacts than an anti-war group, or an electoral campaign, etc.

## Building Your Media List – Developing Good Relations

Building credibility takes time - so start early. The best way to get consistent, good coverage from the media is by building good relationships with members of the media from the very beginning.

### Introduce Your Candidate or Organization.

Schedule a quick meet-and-greet with the district’s news outlets or individual reporters. This can take place in their newsroom or over lunch, coffee, etc. The purpose of this meet and greet is for the reporter to personally get a feel for the candidate and to obtain some background information. Have a media packet ready to give to each contact. The packet should contain a photo, a brief bio of the candidate, and background on the issues and positions important to the campaign/organization. This will be a resource to the reporter as the campaign goes on. Continue this kind of contact when possible throughout the campaign.

### The Four R’s of Media Relations: Respect, Respect, Respect... and Respect.

Good relationships are built on a foundation of mutual respect. No public figure who openly disdained the media ever got a break from them (think Richard Nixon or Jesse Ventura). Throughout your time on the campaign, there are four key principles in working with the media:

- **Respect the reporter’s time** – Understand deadlines. Reporters work on story ideas, interviews, and travel throughout the morning and early afternoon. They will likely work on their story (under deadline) in the afternoon, and work with their editors in the evening. The best time to contact any media outlet for a story is in the morning. Again, ask the individual reporter about his or her deadlines. Return calls and emails as soon as you can (they can air or print a story with or without you).
- **Respect the truth** – Never, never, never lie. No lie will gain you a greater advantage than the risk of getting caught for it. The ‘cover-up’ will be a much bigger story than whatever the truth had been (think Bill Clinton). If you don’t know the answer, say so. If you don’t want a reporter to talk about something, don’t talk about it. And if you know your opponent has something damaging about you, reveal it first – preemptive truth-telling! It steals all the thunder.
- **Respect the relationship** – Reporters are looking for good stories, not friends. Their loyalty is to their job, not to their subjects. You should be friendly, but even in the most casual of settings, they’re still reporters and you’re still a potential news story.
- **Respect the record** – Anything you say can be used for print or broadcast. The “off-the-record” line makes for good television drama (think *The West Wing*), but it doesn’t work quite so conveniently in practice. Assume you and everyone else are always on the record.

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## Reality Check: What is “Newsworthy” supposed to mean, anyway?

The answer: whatever the reporters/editors deem to be “news.” Their job isn’t to report whatever the campaign asks of them. It is your job to obtain coverage. Not everything the campaign does is newsworthy. Those items and events that are newsworthy need to be explicitly framed as such. The traits of “newsworthiness:”

- 1) **New and hot** – Your story should be timely and fresh. If it’s adding to a current hot-topic, what’s the new angle? What are you offering that hasn’t been reported yet?
- 2) **Local and relevant** – Think about how this story directly affects your neighbor. Every media outlet likes to see itself as the local voice. Your story matters to the locals.
- 3) **Visual and quotable** – Your outreach should always have something for every medium and every sense. Radio listeners can picture the story and newspaper readers can hear the sounds.
- 4) **Human interest** – Put a name to the story. If you’re talking about health care, don’t just cite statistics; tell the story of someone to whom people can relate.
- 5) **Conflict or controversy** – Controversy gets coverage, but be careful. Your candidate should be solving problems, not creating them. If your candidate has solutions; he or she is on the right side of the controversy.

# Pitching Your Story

Reporters don't just go out there and *find* the news, the news finds them. That's where the campaign's communications team comes in. The news media will not cover your campaign unless you give them newsworthy campaign stories to cover. This can be as simple as making some quick phone calls.

**Whom to pitch:** Find the reporter under whose beat your story falls - usually the political reporter. Consult your media list (see above). If you're not making progress on one angle, get creative. A story about the rising costs of health care on local employers can be a campaign issue story (political beat), an employment story (business beat), or a local story (city beat).

**What to pitch:** Too often, campaigns will pitch non-stories and believe that the reporter should put it in the news. Just because your candidate has announced a policy position does not mean that the announcement is newsworthy. Try to keep it interesting and new: have the announcement come with an endorsement, have stakeholders speaking at an event, announce at a location where the announcement will have a tangible impact, and ALWAYS work in a visual.

**When to pitch:** Every type of news media has a different flow to its day (see below). Whatever the outlet, it is always best to pitch a story in the morning. Only pitch a story to the media in the afternoon if it's a breaking news development that can not wait. Most editors and news directors decide what is covered at mid-morning meetings. For events you want covered, give the reporters as much notice as possible and be sure to include it in the newswires' daybooks. As always, be aware of the reporters' deadlines for their stories. Usually, a communications director or press secretary will place a pitch call after sending out a 'news advisory' (see below).

When pitching to print media, you are not only pitching to the reporter, but also the reporter's editor. Often a reporter will need to pitch a number of stories to an editor and the editor will decide which ones to pursue. When you pitch you want not only to convince the reporter, but make him or her an advocate for your story.

**How to pitch:** People develop their own style when they pitch call a reporter. The general guidelines are to keep it quick and interesting. If you have not worked with the reporter in the past, briefly introduce yourself and your campaign/organization. After you've become more familiar with the reporter, briefly connect with the reporter (comment on a recent article or an event). Reporters are busy and they don't have time to chat, so don't wait too long to get in the substance. Be ready with reasons why the reporter should change his or her schedule around for you. Your pitch includes the basic information on the event/announcement/etc (which will also be on the news advisory) and the context of why this story is important. Remember to pitch in terms that lead the reporter to believe your story is newsworthy.

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## Sample pitch call:

**Communications Director (CD):** Hey, Joe! This is Jack from DFA-AnyCity. You got a minute?

**Reporter (R):** Hi Jack. I have one minute, shoot.

**CD:** Great. I just shot you over a news advisory and wanted to make sure it got through your fax. Did you get it?

**Reporter:** Hold on a sec.... Yeah, it's right here. Looks like another speaking event.

**CD:** I thought I should tell you about it. I noticed your article on the rising costs of health care last week, obviously the hot issue for everyone right now. Well, my candidate is going to the town Chamber of

Commerce on Tuesday and taking a stance on the issues you wrote about. She's going to talk about how the situation in the state is hurting business. We've got local business leaders there as well. With local businesses speaking out for universal access now, this is going to change the debate.

**Reporter:** I'll see what I can do.

**CD:** Great. My candidate read your article last week and really liked it. She'd love to talk to you at the event. Should I let her know you'll be there?

**Reporter:** I need to check my schedule.

**CD:** Sure thing. I'll check back closer to the event.

## The Typical News Cycle

There is a rhythm to the news. Understanding this rhythm means knowing when to hold or release the news, to pitch a story, and to hold events such that your media outreach has the maximum effect.

<b>2:00 am.</b>	Blogosphere breaks leading stories.
<b>4:30 am</b>	Wire Services (AP, Reuters, etc) rewrite and condense stories from the morning newspapers – called “Rip and read” for use by early morning radio and TV.
<b>4:30 am – 5:00 am</b>	Radio and TV news directors assemble morning newscasts. Both TV and radio will use packages produced for the previous evening’s news in these early broadcasts. Some radio stations will take audio feeds at this time. Some radio and TV will conduct live, in-studio interviews.
<b>6:00 am – 9:00 am</b>	Blogosphere reacts with commentary to leading stories. Morning TV news recycles last night’s news, teasers for evening newscasts. Drive time, peak radio listening.
<b>10:00 am</b>	Front page deadlines for afternoon dailies (hit stands at 1-2pm). Good time to pitch stories to TV assignment desks. Good time to hold news conferences, media events.
<b>11:00 am– 1:30 pm</b>	Most television packages shoot to allow for writing and editing before airing. Good time to hold news conferences and media events to get in today’s news. Good time to pitch print reporters for upcoming events, stories, and other items.
<b>1:30 pm – 5:00 pm</b>	Reporters on deadline working on stories. Expect media inquiries: be ready to answer questions and return calls.
<b>5:00 pm</b>	Deadlines for back news sections of morning papers, including local and regional news not already slated to be front page news. Not a good time to pitch stories. Not a good time to hold news conferences/media events, but only to get into the next day’s news.
<b>5:00 pm – 6:30 pm</b>	“Drive time” – peak radio listening.
<b>5:00 pm – 8:00 pm</b>	Print reporters working with editors on front page stories. Expect media inquiries: be ready to answer questions and return calls. Evening TV news broadcasts. Not a good time to pitch stories. Not a good time to hold news conferences/ media events for major or breaking stories or for tomorrow’s news.
<b>8:00 pm. – 9:00 pm</b>	Front page deadlines, depending on size of paper. Blogosphere spins the commentary; if there is sufficient favorable chatter on your event/topic/news or announcement, keep up the buzz with online statements, a follow-up release, or commentary. Some local TV stations nighttime news broadcast. Guests due in studio for TV interviews on 10pm newscasts.
<b>10:00 pm – 11:30 pm</b>	Local TV stations nighttime news broadcast.

<b>Sun.</b>	Good day for stories to appear in all media (most listeners/readers/viewers), poor day to pitch to print media. Sunday papers typically run longer feature stories worked on for the entire week. Pitching on Sat. may not get you in the Sun. paper.
<b>Mon.</b>	Good day for stories to appear, good to pitch stories.
<b>Tue – Thurs.</b>	Best days to pitch stories, best for stories to appear and best for media events.
<b>Fri.</b>	Poor day for stories to appear, worst day to pitch a story to any media.
<b>Sat.</b>	Worst day for a story to appear (fewest listeners/readers/viewers).

\*\* Of course, if you need to release bad news, you would use this cycle differently, most likely releasing on Friday after 5pm, preferably before a holiday.

# Earned Media Tools for the Campaign

## The News Advisory

A news advisory (also called a ‘press advisory’) serves as a notice or invitation to the media for an event. This is a brief, simple document stating the facts. It has the information necessary for the reporter to get to the event and a brief blurb to hook the reporter. It lists what, when, where, and who. The advisory will note any photo and interview opportunities for the media. The organization, send date, contact info, and “NEWS ADVISORY” are clearly marked at the top. Advisories are sent out a few days to a week before the event and the morning of the event.

Always follow up News Advisories with pitch calls. During the call, ask if the reporter has received it (be assertive, ask them to check and see if it went through. That way, they’re likely holding it in their hand as you pitch to them). Advisories can also serve as a notice for a candidate’s public schedule.

A sample is included in Appendix C.

## The News Release

News releases (also called ‘press releases’) are news stories put out by the campaign or organization. They are from the perspective of the campaign itself –the story the way you want to see it published. Campaigns put these out to assist the reporter writing the story by providing material and point of reference. News releases are also a good way to release a statement. Ideally, the outlet will take the release and paste portions directly into the story (more likely for smaller, understaffed papers). Carefully writing and formatting the release makes it easier for the outlet to do this.

For media events, a campaign should only distribute a news release during or after the event. This is an important distinction between the advisory and the release; the advisory draws them to the event and the release is what they get for coming. The release is written in past tense. This helps the reporter remember your version of the event. Afterward, the news release is distributed to all the outlets which did not appear. Most of your media hits will be from outlets who did not show up to the event, but with whom you did a thorough follow-up. The news release allows reporters to cover the story even if they could not show up.

Check for spelling, typos, punctuation, and so on. This sounds simple, but in the heat of a campaign it can be overlooked. Establish a system to have another person edit your press releases. An outlet will judge the professionalism of your campaign based on your news release.

News releases are simple, short, and consistent. You will almost never need to exceed two pages (though you might include secondary information such as research in a press packet). As with all communications, your news release will include your message.

A news release should be clearly and explicitly designated as such. The words “FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE” should be in the upper left hand corner and your contact information (name, phone numbers and email) in the upper right hand corner. The release is written like a story and starts with a headline (and optional subhead). The lead paragraph should include a ‘hook’ (something catchy or interesting) in the first line and should include all the basic facts – who, what, when, where, why. The next couple of paragraphs will have a quote and further explanation, followed by supporting material, and possibly other quotes. The news release ends with a centered series of pound signs, “###” to indicate the end. If your release must exceed two pages, each page ends with a centered “-more-” or “- 1 of 2 -” until the final page. Factual references should be cited, or better, included in the media packet.

A sample news release is included in Appendix C.

## Radio Feeds and Actualities

Radio feeds are the audio version of the news release, condensed into a 30 second spot. Radio feeds start with a staffer introducing the speaker with a five second lead-in; for example, “Candidate X released a statement in reaction to the governor’s proposed cut in social services today.” The lead-in is followed by the candidate reading his/her quote (remember the 27-9-3). The feed closes with the staffer’s concluding line and how to contact the campaign. Only the candidate’s quote will be played by the radio outlet; the intro and closing are for the benefit of the outlet. Not all outlets accept radio feeds from the campaign.

Actualities differ from radio feeds in that they are live recordings of a candidate or speaker at an actual event. The sound bite is captured live at the event – not pre-recorded. The lead-in and closing can still be attached. News radio outlets typically prefer actualities over feeds, but do not confuse the two or try to pitch a radio feed as an actuality – radio news directors know better.

## Earned Media on the Editorial Page

Getting your candidate’s name and positions in the editorial section of a newspaper is a major victory for the campaign. The editorial section of the paper is the second most frequently read section of the paper. It confers credibility and sets the tone for the discussion of issues. This is also the section of the paper over which you and your supporters have the most control.

### Editorial Board Meetings

A newspaper only makes an endorsement of a candidate or position after deliberation of the entire editorial board staff. These endorsements can be enormously important for your campaign. An endorsement carries the weight and credibility of the paper and provides excellent earned media for use in everything from mailings to fundraising to field communications. You should make yourself a part of this process by being available to the editorial staff of the paper and setting up a meeting with them for the purpose of discussing an endorsement.

Prior research and the ability to deliver your message consistently are the key skills to a good meeting. The campaign staff should spend time researching prior positions the editorial board has taken, especially if any of these positions match or contradict the position of your candidate or organization. Be sure to research past candidate endorsements as well. You will be expected to have a deep understanding of the issues important to the circulation area of that paper. After researching the editorial board itself, the campaign or organization should run through a role-play at least once so the candidate or speaker is prepared going into the meeting.

You should come fully prepared to have a lengthy discussion on any of these issues, knowing you will be on the record the entire time. The key is to stay on message, even as you discuss issues in depth. The editorial board is getting a feel for your candidate and will not restrict itself to searching for sound bites, so it is easy to veer off message or become too casual.

### Op-Eds

Op-Eds are guest commentaries, typically appearing opposite editorials in the editorial section of a newspaper at a length typically ranging from 500-700 words. Op-Eds allow the campaign or organization to thoroughly inform the reading audience of an issue and take a firm stance on it without the typical filtering and reduction of the newspaper’s editorial process.

The largest factors in getting your Op-Ed published are timeliness and authority/credibility. Your Op-Ed, as with all earned media, should be timely – a commentary on a current hot topic or event. For example, an auto plant closure might provide an opportunity for “a frank discussion on this county’s job growth strategy.” The other major factor is the authority of the contributor to comment on the subject. Op-Eds are typically authored by experts or office-holders. Establishing the credibility of the author (or, if necessary, finding a surrogate with credibility) will get you published by the paper and noticed by the reader.

## Letters to the Editor

Having letters to the editor (LTEs) published is an effective tactic for media coverage for a grassroots campaign. The LTE section of the paper is widely read and reacted to and relatively easy to break into. Anyone can write in to the paper and, given a good letter, anyone can get published. LTE tactics can be tied into the larger communications strategy easily and effectively.

The first principle of getting LTEs published on a regular basis is to know your paper. Each paper has its own set of rules regarding submission, length, timeliness, and exclusivity. Find out what they are. Next, cast a wide net and include all the papers in your area, including those that are small or have a focused constituency. Finally, remember both quantity AND quality count. An issue becomes hot if many people suddenly write into the paper about it, but your paper isn't going to publish poorly written material.

### Qualities that get your letter published

**Reactionary** – Newspapers like to print LTEs which react to or reference stories they recently ran. An explicit reference to a previous story is often posted at the beginning of the letter. If you get creative; you can make just about any article in the paper related to your issue.

**Timely** – LTEs referencing a story are best submitted within three days of that story's printing.

**Concise** – This is an important trait of a good letter. Papers can only print only so many letters and prefer to print those which fit nicely into their limited space. Get to know the paper's word count (usually 250 – 300 words) and undershoot it by 50 or more every time. Focus on one issue. Brevity trumps eloquence for LTEs.

**Localized and Personalized** – LTEs are the most personal and local part of the paper. Even national issues should have a local angle. Use personal pronouns and local place names. On the LTE section, a personal story trumps a list of facts. Statements like “two-thirds of the state's waterways” are less powerful than “the creek in my back yard.”

**Grammar and Tone** – Proofread even the shortest LTEs. Avoid invectives.

**Smart and Witty** – Citing a fact or two does add credibility. Stating that fact in a clever way is an even bigger bonus.

**Contact Info** – Most papers require verification of the letter's author before printing.

**Follow Up** – Another way to impact your chances of getting published is to follow up after submitting your LTE. Ask if they received it and if they will publish it.

**Rapid Response Teams.** Whenever the campaign or organization needs third-party response in support or opposition to articles in the paper or actions taken by either campaign, this team should be ready. A model LTE Rapid Response Team will have two main components:

- The people who write the LTEs.
- And the people who submit the LTEs.

The first team, the writers, is adept at concise clever writing on short notice. They can and should submit their own LTEs, but the newspaper will not publish the same LTE author over and over again. This is why you have the second group. These people are on call to receive, modify/personalize, and submit LTEs drafted by the first group. This second group must personalize their letter – the paper will not publish obvious form letters. The second group is much larger and can encompass your entire volunteer base. Three people can flood a paper by spending a few minutes drafting LTEs and finding 12 – 15 submitters.

**Pro-Active LTE seeding.** Why wait to respond when you can start setting the tone on the editorial page? Have your LTE team ready to seed the editorial page with letters friendly to the candidate's current (or upcoming) message. If the candidate is set to discuss local unemployment numbers, have a few LTEs printed asking for the candidates to stand up and take a (friendly) stance on unemployment.

## News Conferences and Media Events

News conferences and other planned media events are a great way to attract attention to the campaign and build recognition for the candidate or issue. They also consume a great deal of time. In planning your media event, make sure your ‘news’ is truly ‘newsworthy.’ News conferences in particular should be reserved for ‘big news.’ Some media outlets may not come to events unless explicitly labeled a ‘news conference.’ You can be creative about what that means (for example, the press conference could include a tour of the local clinic as the visual), but be sensitive to what motivates outlets to come to your events. Disappointing a reporter makes it less likely for that reporter to spend time covering future events.

### Before The Event

Plan, Plan, Plan. For major news events or anytime you expect your candidate to get media coverage, plan every possible detail. Someone should confirm venue and other logistical details. One person works with the speakers to stay on message. Another reaches out to the media, invites them to the event, and follows up with them afterward. In smaller campaigns, one person may find themselves doing all of this.

Your team will need to pick an appropriate time and place for the event. The timing should work with the candidate/speaker’s schedule and also fit with the flow of the news cycle. The place for the event should fit with the message of the announcement. If the conference is about your health care plan, hold the event outside a clinic. If pollution is the issue, get a billowing smokestack in the background. Choose a place that is easily accessible to the media. You will have a difficult time convincing a reporter to leave their work for extended periods of time just to get to one media event.

Visuals are important for TV and print media. Be explicit about your inclusion of photo opportunities at the event. Research your location. Your site might have a compelling story and could act as a creative hook for the story. Note the availability of electrical outlets if indoors and check the acoustics to figure out if your speaker(s) will need a microphone.

Prep your materials. Include your news release, accompanying background information, contact information, and other relevant materials in a media packet for all outlets that send reporters. A sample press kit is included at the end of this section. Any visuals you created yourself should be prepared well before the event.

Media outreach. As soon as a time, place, and message are set, the press secretary needs to reach out to the media. Identify which outlets you need to cover the event (usually all outlets which cover news in a given area), send out the media advisory, and follow up with a pitch call. This outreach should take place a week to three days before the event. Major events may have more notice, but reporters typically do not plan their media events that far ahead.

### Sample Timeline

<b>1 – 2 weeks beforehand</b>	Schedule date and secure a location. Make sure to thoroughly scout the location. Develop message. Find and confirm speakers.
<b>2 – 3 days beforehand</b>	Draft, edit, and send media advisory (fax and email). Begin pitch calls. Write news release, radio feed, and speakers’ statements. Compile press packets. Recruit necessary volunteers, assign roles. Crowd-build, if necessary.
<b>1 – 2 days beforehand</b>	Establish speaker order. Reconfirm speakers, review statements and message. Confirm logistics, confirm volunteers.
<b>Day of</b>	Confirm and re-pitch to media. Event set-up and early arrival. Begin media follow-up immediately after the event.
<b>Day after</b>	Continue media follow-up. Send thank you notes when applicable.

# The Message Calendar

Campaign communication is sometimes reactive and opportunistic. An event happens or a news item breaks and your campaign must respond. Because of the chaos of a campaign, especially as the election date draws nearer, people forget that much *more* of campaign communication is planned. The campaign makes an event happen. The campaign *is* the news item. A good way to maintain control over political media coverage is to use a message calendar, also called a media calendar.

The message calendar is a planning guide used to keep people focused and pro-active about news coverage. Posting your calendar allows everyone to see the day’s or week’s message. Earned media *and* paid media adhere to the message on the calendar. All public events and statements include the message. Ads which are to appear reflect what the candidate has been saying about the message.

**Sample Calendar: Universal Access to Primary and Preventative Health care**

Campaign message.	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Sat and Sun
<b>Health care Access: “Every Vermonter deserves a doctor.”</b>	1 Paid TV and radio ads up.  Democratic radio feeds, release on HC reform.	2 Tour local clinic serving the uninsured.  [Paid radio and TV]	3 [Paid TV and radio]	4 [Paid TV and radio]	5 Talk Radio appearance on WXYZ – drive time.	6 – 7 Volunteers canvass in 29 targeted districts.
<b>Quality Health care: “Prevention is the best cure – early and basic access keeps Vermonters healthy”</b>	8 Democratic release, radio feeds on HC reform.	9 Visit children’s hospital.	10	11 Radio Call-in show at WABC – evening broadcast.	12	13 – 14 Volunteers canvass in 29 targeted districts.
<b>Health care Cost Containment: “Vermonters and their employers need an integrated solution.”</b>	15 Democratic release, radio feeds on HC reform.	16 Luncheon, speech at Rotary Club	17	18 Opposition speaking event. Announce response.	19	20 – 21 Volunteers canvass in 29 targeted districts.
<b>Health care Access: “Every Vermonter deserves a doctor.”</b>	22 Democratic release, radio feeds on HC reform.	23 Surrogates launch attack ads.  Meeting with Chamber of Commerce	24 Announce planned endorsements	25	26 Business roundtable public discussion on public tv.	27 – 28 Volunteers canvass in 29 targeted districts.
<b>Quality Health care: “Prevention is the best cure – early and basic access to keep Vermonters healthy.”</b>	29 Democratic release, radio feeds on HC reform.	30	31 Full News Conference at capitol.			

# Crisis Management

In the course of any competitive campaign, you may have to deal with negative attacks or damaging information uncovered by an opponent or the media. Whatever the nature of the crisis, three things must guide your response:

## **Don't panic. Don't lie. There is no drama.**

A well prepared campaign will expect attacks. You have a landscape memo, you have a message box, and you have had frank discussions with the candidate in the very beginning. Anything potentially damaging about the candidate should have been researched by your campaign first with responses locked away for use in case of an emergency. Because you've seen this coming, your response is thoughtful and prepared. In the case that your campaign is surprised by the allegation, your response is thoughtful and prepared. Either way: Don't panic. Don't lie. There is no drama.

## **To respond or not.**

In most cases you must respond to the charge. Letting a charge hang in the air only allows your opposition to hammer on it, and reporters to speculate. One circumstance in which you might not respond is if the charge comes from a little-known opponent desperate to get media attention. The media usually sees through this, but might fixate on it if they see you making a big deal out of it. Regardless of the response, your tone and demeanor throughout the response says as much as any words you utter. Don't panic. Don't lie. There is no drama.

## **How to respond.**

First, get all the facts. Do not engage a reporter at the outset, or become defensive or conciliatory. Get the details. If there is documentation, ask for a copy to be faxed to you. Tell the reporter that you'll look into it and get back to them. Do research into the problem and, if possible, have documentation available for the reporter. If you are prompt with the reporter, he or she will appreciate it. More importantly, they reporter will be less likely to make a big deal out of it. Your response should be in the same news cycle as the allegation. This way your response runs alongside the allegation instead of leaving the charge unanswered. But if you cannot give the media something substantive, keep gathering the facts you need. "No comment" might sound bad, but it's much better than an ill-prepared or easily refutable response.

The easiest way to take down a negative claim from an opponent is to refute any factual basis. If you can disprove part of the claim, it will cast doubt on the entire allegation. Be careful that this refutation isn't nit-picky. This only gives the story more play. More than just disproving the claim, you must return with a strong message, preferably one that gets the dialogue back on track, "*People are tired of all these negative attacks. It's time to talk about the real issues. People want to know what's happening to our health care system.*"

## **Yeah, so?**

The best way to downplay a crisis is to take the controversy out of it. As soon as you know there is some truth to an allegation, admit it. Your best bet is to admit it before anyone else can bring it up. If you quibble over minor facts, attempt to parse the truth, or stonewall the media, you'll make a minor situation into a scandal. The quicker you admit, apologize, and move on, the less of a story it becomes, "*Yeah, it looks like I did add it wrong. Well, I'm sending a check off to the IRS today, so that should be taken care of. Maybe I should fire my accountant and hire my opponent's!*"

- The obviously evasive, "I didn't inhale," quote became a campaign issue in Clinton's run. But when Gore ran in 2000, he confessed to smoking marijuana upfront and almost no one cared.

- Michael Dukakis' wife publicly confessed a 30-year diet pill addiction and was praised by the press for her forthrightness. Gov. Dukakis ran for President without mention of the story.

# Troubleshooting

## Reporter Makes A Factual Error

Typically these are minor errors – misspellings, time and place errors, etc. The reporter may have heard it incorrectly, written it incorrectly, or had it edited incorrectly. It might not have been the reporter’s fault. You should call reporters and let them know about the error so they don’t repeat it (and so they know you’re paying attention). Minor errors do not need a correction, but rather acknowledgement. Be friendly – chances are the reporter will appreciate it. Minor errors do not affect a campaign.

Larger errors may have an impact on your campaign and will require a correction. If the reporter misstates the campaign’s stance on an issue, ask for a correction. Again, the reporter will probably acknowledge and apologize, but making sure that the paper prints the correction is important so that the misstatement can not be used against you. Online databases and search engines will keep that error alive forever if not corrected. Larger errors can be used against you by an opponent and have the credibility of earned media.

To ask for a correction, first go to the reporter who made the mistake. If you approach the editor before the reporter, the reporter will resent it. Generally, you only need to contact the reporter. Before making the request, verify that the error is factual and verifiable. Documentation available will help make your case. Editors and reporters might hesitate about corrections because it takes up valuable space, or they might have pride issues, but be persistent. Ideally, the media prints/broadcasts the correction. A reporter might ask you to write a letter to the editor (LTE) to serve as a correction. You should demand a formal correction over sending a letter and ask to speak to the editor at that point. If necessary, submit an LTE.

## Poor Coverage

Campaigns, especially down-ballot campaigns, often complain about poor coverage. The media hardly ever pays attention to down-ballot races to begin with. Campaigns must work hard to get their campaigns covered. It’s not the media’s job to cover your events, rather to report the news. So ask yourself if you’ve done a sufficient job of creating the news. Analyze your pitch calls, news advisories, and releases. Analyze the time and locations of your events and how much notice you gave the reporters. Figure out what stories have been your competition. Reporters often do not cover down-ballot campaigns more than three weeks until an election.

## Not Taking the Campaign Seriously

If a reporter is skeptical of your campaign, s/he is probably not the only one. A candidate cannot simply assert his or her credibility; instead the candidate must work to build credibility. You can do this by releasing positive poll numbers, positive finance reports, announcing endorsements, or even alluding to coverage you’ve received elsewhere. Obviously, you need to have these things to begin with. If you don’t, then that is the reason for the reporter’s reluctance.

## Gaffes, Stumbles, and Other Missteps

Your candidate has just shot her or himself in the foot, on the record. Now what? This kind of damage control is similar to the principles outlined in the ‘Crisis Management’ section above. The gaffe isn’t dramatic if you do not allow it to be. If the comment is not serious and no one is picking it up, don’t dwell. Often the case is that someone does pick it up and this is how it came to your attention in the first place. If so, take care of the misstatement quickly– in the same news cycle, if possible. If your candidate has made a factual error, clarify the comment and put it into a larger value-specific context, “*Oh, that’s right, I did mean 40,000, not 400,000. Regardless, even one child without access to a doctor is one too many. Vermonters deserve better.*” If the candidate has misspoken on a sensitive issue, apologize quickly and get back to the substantive issues. You can prevent this kind of mistake altogether by prepping the candidate before every public appearance, making sure he or she gets enough rest, and scheduling wisely.

## Media Kit Checklist

Media kits are given to reporters who show up at media events. The media kits are a set of documents to be used as a resource for reporters. They include:

- News release
- Bios and contact information for speakers
- Information about the organization/campaign (usually a brochure)
- Cited sources and additional research on topics discussed
- Good articles that have been written in the past (should come from an accredited and relevant publication).

## News Conference Checklist

Venue:

- Location scouted – look for proximity to news media, parking, acoustics, outlets, accessibility, size, distractions. Remember to visit site at the same time of day you plan to hold the event.
- Location fits message
- Permit requirements, security requirements, who needs to approve all aspects of being there
- Potential for visuals – either for those on site (i.e. a smokestack) or the campaign’s own (i.e. a backdrop)
- Check for necessary equipment (podium, microphone, amplifier, etc)
- Beverages, snacks? Coffee for morning news conferences is a nice gesture.

Timing:

- When in the news cycle does this event fall? When will your story hit?
- With what other stories will you compete (hint: inquire about the newswires’ daybooks)?

Message

- How does this tie into your message for that day/week/month?
- What will be the quotable lines (underline or bold them in speeches)?
- Who are the speakers? What is the speaking order? How long are they speaking (<3 – 5 min)?
- Have you written or at least reviewed and approved all the statements?
- Practice likely questions during Q&A and prep for post event interviews

Media Outreach

- Advance notice to priority reporters – just a hint (when applicable)
- News advisories out to all targeted media two or three days prior (when possible).
- Pitch calls following advisories
- Second round news advisories and pitch calls the morning of the event
- Media packets prepared

Follow up Plan

- Know the media outlets likely to show and not show.
- Is your media contact list up-to-date? Be prepared to call, fax, email, or even visit outlets who did not show.
- Follow up with reporters who were at the event to answer questions.