

ASSOCIATION OF RESEARCH LIBRARIES AND SPARC



**MEDIA**  
**MAP:**  
CHARTING A MEDIA RELATIONS STRATEGY

FOR LIBRARIES AND LIBRARY ORGANIZATIONS



## Media Map: Charting a Media Relations Strategy

First Edition  
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# INTRODUCTION

**Not so long ago, libraries and library organizations were media-free zones.**

If reporters called, their stories focused on a new library director or the millionth acquisition. Today, libraries are plugged into many of the most exciting – and difficult – issues swirling around cyberspace. From copyright to corporate monopolies, from intellectual property to information technology, from publishing paradigms to perpetual access, libraries today have a chance to shape policy and public opinion.

**This guide will help your organization:**

- navigate its new role as policy influencer
- communicate effectively with the media
- deliver an effective message
- sell a particular story
- act as a valued media source

And if something goes wrong, this guide will pilot you through the most important points of crisis communications.

**First things first.** Pick up today's paper and find a story that is interesting to you, professionally. Take a moment to imagine how you, as a media spokesperson, would relate your organization's point of view on this issue.

## CONGRATULATIONS!

you've just taken the first step toward hacking a clear path through the wilds of media relations.



# A MEDIA PRIMER

**Sometimes** your library will need media coverage because your Dean demanded it...  
**Sometimes** you're sitting on a story of genuine interest to the community...  
**Sometimes** your point of view may influence local or federal legislation...

**In all of these cases,** a media relations plan is critical if your organization wants to position itself as a player or participant in the issues that matter to you. And the news media is unique in its ability to shape public perception of your organization.

**The benefits of good press can be extraordinarily rewarding.**

It can bring recognition to employees whose hard work would otherwise go unnoticed. In other cases it can place your institution in a position of influence and power. In addition, it can support fundraising appeals or help a library director or employee become a solid source for future stories on related issues. Whether press is intended or unintended, positive or negative, depends greatly on the way you communicate with the media. To know them may not be to love them – but understanding what makes them tick goes a long way.

**And often what makes them tick is controversy.** In television, it makes for great moments: just think back to the most memorable stories on "60 Minutes." The print media, from daily newspapers to trade magazines, depend on conflict as well.

**HINT:**

**Demonstrate how mainstream news impacts your organization locally.**

## Make a conflict work for you.

If a journal is folding because it can't afford to keep up with the demands of electronic publishing – signaling a death knell for small, independent societies — — —

**that's a juicy story for the media.**

If your library helps breathe new life into that journal by offering its hosting services, and is among the first to think of such a solution — — — — —

**it's an even better story for you *and* the media.**

## Understand the nature of news.

It also helps to understand what is newsworthy. You already know what's considered news because you read the paper. Disasters are front-page headlines. Political elections, Supreme Court rulings, the stock market, technology breakthroughs also rate high.

The goal is to capitalize on controversy, and create controversy when appropriate, to get your positive message across.

**HINT:**

**Capitalize on controversy.**

## MEDIA BASICS 101

- **Media are seldom going to let information you provide them go unchallenged.** Be prepared to back up your claims.
- **Media biases exist.** Use them to your advantage or thoroughly prepare to combat them and still achieve your goals.
- **Journalists are always facing deadlines.** Often they are working on several stories simultaneously and are under a great deal of pressure. Be aware of their responsibilities to their editors and their readership, and it can work in your favor.
- **Decision-making power resides in many cases with news editors or assignment editors, not reporters.** So give reporters a story they can “sell” to their editor.
- **Don't lie during an interview.** The reporter will find out and your credibility will evaporate forever.
- **Everything is on the record.** Always. Some information can be given “on background,” which means that you should not be identified as the source. But make sure the reporter knows this is important to you, and if you don't want to see your name attached to it the next day, or if you have reason to distrust the reporter, think twice about saying it.

## PACKAGING AND SELLING YOUR MESSAGE

Empathy is one of those old-fashioned values that often gets lost in a professional context. But by putting yourself in a reporter's shoes you can successfully shape the story you want told.

**This section of the guide assumes that you are proactively seeking coverage of your organization in the print media.** In other words, you have to sell a reporter on why he/she should write about your organization. To conduct an effective sell, think first of what the buyer needs. This is where empathy comes in. Reporters react most enthusiastically when you can provide them with a full news package – why your story is important to their readership, the problem it solves, sources they can speak to, data and statistics that back up your claims. They'll want to do their own work, too, but by outlining a possible direction for the story you're making it easier for them to sell it to their editor.

As you identify the story you want to sell, focus on a particular audience. Is it important that the library community hear your news (i.e., *Library Journal*, *Internet Librarian*, *D-Lib*), or the readers of Madison, Wisconsin's *The Capital Times*? If the story is focused locally, would it be appropriate for a larger local readership, such as the *Wisconsin State Journal* or Wisconsin Public Radio? Does your library's innovation/point of view plug into a national issue like Napster, or legislation like UCITA? If so, the *New York Times* or the *Chicago Tribune* may be the place to go.

### HINT:

**Provide the reporter with a complete news "package."**

Once you target a publication (or group of publications), it's important to become familiar enough with that publication so that you know where your story would best fit. If you've noticed that the paper has one particular reporter who covers publishing issues, or one reporter who covers technology, you're on the right track. If it's too difficult to find a particular reporter to pitch a story to, target a section of the paper – Business, or Living, or the occasional Technology supplement – and search the masthead for that section's editor.

### To review:

you've identified: the story you want to sell,

your target audience,

the outlet you want to tell your story to,

and the reporter or editor you want to pitch to.

**Writing the pitch letter is simple compared to the hard work you've just done.**

## WRITING THE PITCH

### Remember the golden rule: empathy.

Think about what kind of story would pique your interest if you were a reporter. Then type out a few paragraphs detailing your idea for a story: the problem solved by your service or product, sources the reporter can speak to, data and statistics that back up your claims. If you're pitching to a local paper and there's a local angle, emphasize this.

### Your pitch letter should include:

- Who you are and where you're from
- What's new about what you're trying to "sell"
- Why it's different
- Why readers care
- How it ties in with other newsworthy events
- How it relates to other stories of interest

You don't have to lay everything out; offer to phone the reporter in a few days to discuss your idea, and you can expand on it then. (If appropriate, include a well-placed line about why what you're doing is so controversial, or how it addresses a controversial problem.) And when you sit back, ask yourself: **if you were a reporter, is this a story you would want to cover?** If you were a reader of the paper you're targeting, why would your eyes linger over the text of this particular story?

**In other words, is it really news?** And if so – one final question – what kind of news? A press release may win you a few lines in a round-up column, but telling the story behind the press release may be feature-worthy. By thinking all of these details through before you send your pitch letter into the ether, you're saving yourself and the reporter valuable time, and likely increasing your chances of meeting your goal.

### HINT:

Conceive the headline you would prefer, and create your pitch letter with that in mind.

## ABOUT THE TIMING

Be very aware that daily newspaper reporters will probably not want to hear from you by phone after 3 p.m., unless they've asked you to return their call. Most reporters like email because of the flexibility it gives them in responding when it's convenient. If you're sending a number of pitches, it may be worthwhile to purchase a media directory. A good directory lists out media outlets along with reporters and their beats, their contact information and their preferred way of being contacted. However, you can usually compile contact information from a newspaper's web site or by phoning the switchboard.

Don't be afraid to call to follow up on your pitch; chances are very good your email, fax or letter was benignly ignored. By being polite and persistent on the phone, you can bring your story to the reporter's attention, giving it every chance to see life in print.

News generally slows around holidays, so this may be a good time to pitch your story. Just before a federal holiday or the week before Christmas are especially good times.

## ABOUT THE MESSAGE

It is imperative that in formulating your message you keep it clear and concise, obeying the high-school-thesis-writer's rule of inserting your main point in the very first paragraph. No rambling allowed.

Write out your main message, supporting message, and a key detail for each of your points, and keep it in an easily accessible folder. When a reporter calls, you can pull this out and remember what you want to cover. You can keep data, fact sheets or graphics in this folder, and offer to fax them to interested reporters at the end of an interview.

# THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

Every good story has a before, during and after. Same with every good interview. This section of the guide assumes that 1) a reporter has responded to your pitch and wants to schedule an interview, or 2) a reporter has phoned your organization and asked for a response to a current happening. In either case, good preparation, confidence, and solid follow-up on your part can help you communicate the desired message.

## BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

Imagine your response to the following scenario.

“Hello?”

“Bill Smith here. *L.A. Times*. I’m tracking the story on the Big Bad Publisher merging with the Little Guy, and I’d like a library view on how your services to patrons will suffer. As I understand it, this will wreak havoc on libraries your size. Can we talk for a few minutes about your opinion on this?”

At this point, you:

- A.** agree that this merger spells the end of the library as we know it
- B.** sputter “No Comment”
- C.** tell the reporter that you’re in the middle of something, ask his deadline, and promise to get back to him before then
- D.** refer the call to the Dean

If you answered C, you are well on your way to success. You are never obligated to speak to a reporter until you are prepared to do so, and even if you are prepared it is often useful to take a few moments to gather your notes and your thoughts.

### HINT:

**Respond to reporter’s questions only when you are fully prepared. Cheat sheets are always allowed!**

If your interview is scheduled some time in the future and you have more time for prep work, the following can make your discussion even more productive.

**Research the reporter’s other stories.** For example, if you’ve scheduled your interview with Bill Smith from the *L.A. Times* later in the day, search the *L.A. Times* web site for past stories he’s written. You can either compliment him on that great human interest story he wrote about a local bibliophile, or know in advance that he believes that only residents of the planet Dorkdom buy printed books.

Reading the reporter’s past articles also helps to understand the extent to which he or she researches a story. You’ll know, in this case, how firmly to insist your quotes be read back to you before the story is published.

Reading the reporter’s past stories and familiarizing yourself with the publication will also help you determine who the audience is. This is critical to your preparation.

When arranging your interview, feel free to volunteer another angle...

“You know, Bill,” you might say, “I haven’t seen any articles about the way the merger will affect faculty’s ability to get their research published. This could have major repercussions on the tenure process. Could I put you in touch with a few of our faculty members who have made known their strong feelings about this already?”

Naturally, because you are an expert mapper of media strategies, you have already shot off an email to the appropriate faculty members asking if they are willing to talk.

## IDENTIFYING SPOKESPEOPLE

Finding the appropriate person within your organization to comment, if you feel you're not the right person, may be a challenge. Because it's so important that you maintain a consistent message, it might be appropriate that the library director who gave an interview to the *Utah Union* also be interviewed by the *L.A. Times*, though if a library director and an associate university librarian are equally prepared and on message, either could probably do the job. In many cases the choice is made with a sensitivity to internal politics.

If the reporter is interested in a topic that you are not familiar with, he will generally appreciate a referral. Don't feel compelled to speak about issues you're not comfortable with, but do offer the reporter another source. Brief this source on your conversations with the reporter and provide the background you've gathered.

**With all of this information in hand, you might feel ready to pick up the phone and dial Bill's number.**

But sometimes the most difficult part of an interview is relating to a reporter the simple background on your organization. Don't assume that because they have called you they know what you do or why you are involved in this particular issue. It is also important not to speak in jargon or use acronyms or technical terms.

### HINT:

Try standing up when you do phone interviews. When we stand up it's easier to remind ourselves not to ramble, and we often speak with more energy.

## MORE INTERVIEW SUGGESTIONS

### **Role-playing helps.**

Run through a question-and-answer period with a colleague who is familiar with the issue the interview centers on. The role playing may put you at ease when the real questions are thrown your way.

### **Before the interview, ask yourself the question that you would cringe to get, and answer it.**

Then ask yourself another one. And another one. By fully exploring and feeling comfortable with the "worst" questions, you'll be prepared if they come.

## DURING THE INTERVIEW

**It seems like only an hour ago** that you answered for yourself the most difficult question you thought the reporter would ask. And here's a question that's actually **worse** – and the reporter is on the phone right now!

**Keeping the interview under your control is your first priority.**

*Don't feel you have to answer the question exactly as posed.*

*Instead, use it as an opportunity to address the general topic.*

## Rephrasing the question is one way to control the interview.

**Q.** Why hasn't your library adopted the Super-Labor-Intensive industry standard yet?

**A.** I think what you're asking is whether or not our library is ready to meet the challenges of the information age, and I can assure you we are. Our systems are running at peak performance and our employees just finished a six-month training course that places our library at the cutting edge. Our library serves more users than ever before, and we're planning to scale up our services even more.

**If the reporter throws you something negative and incorrect, don't repeat it in your answer, and refute it right away. Having your cheat sheet at hand can help with this.**

**Q.** It's been said that your organization has stolen its agenda from the Association of Smiley Faces, which paved the way on these issues long before your group made a name for itself. How do you answer these accusations?

**A.** We have a solid sense of what our members need, and our agenda reflects this. In the past year membership is up 50 percent because we've fulfilled many of our goals, including...

### HINT:

**Replace a negative question with a positive answer without repeating the negative comment.**

## BRACKETING YOUR MESSAGE

**Another way to control the interview is to bracket your important statements.**

"The critical issue is our..."

"There are three things that make us stand out..."

"At the heart of the issue is..."

Backing up your main points with data can help underscore your main message. Data lends credibility to your claims, so they seem less like self-indulgent assertions and more the generally-accepted reality. If you can legitimately claim to be the leader of the pack, data will only help bolster your position.

In addition, supporting information shows that you've already accomplished your goals and they're not just wishful thinking.

**Your closure** should reinforce your message points, provide a call to action, and leave a lasting impression. Again, bracketing your most important statements is one way to do this.

**During your closure and throughout the interview, remember to “brand” your organization at every opportunity.**

Don't use “we” and “us” and “our.” It's important to state the name of your organization, just as it would be critical to brand a product or service in a commercial context. This is even more crucial in a broadcast interview.

Consider the difference in these two quotes:

*“We're certain that our policies bring our members the utmost,” said Damian Rotundo, director of the **Midwest Consortium**. “Our prices are fair, and we offer the broadest services of anyone in the business. We're proud of our history.”*

*“The **Midwest Consortium** brings members the utmost,” said Ramian Dotundo, director of the **Midwest Consortium**. “At the **Midwest Consortium**, our prices are fair, and we offer the broadest services of anyone in the library business. The **Midwest Consortium** is proud of its history.”*

If editors decide to do a “call-out” – the sentence that's pulled out and magnified to illustrate the rest of the article – the Midwest Consortium's name will be far more recognizable in the second example.

## HINT:

**Brand your organization in the public eye via consistent messages.**

## AFTER THE INTERVIEW

**It's perfectly reasonable to ask a reporter to see the results of your interview before it goes to press.**

In most cases reporters will not send you their story, but they usually agree to read your quotes back to you, or read back to you the general “feel” of the quote to confirm the information.

**Ask the reporter when the story will run.** If he/she isn't sure, follow up afterward to make sure you get a copy of the story.

**After the story runs, send the reporter a note thanking him/her.**

It's common for reporters to receive emails berating their coverage but rare to receive a simple message expressing appreciation for the time they put into understanding an issue, or their fair approach.

If the story is favorable, call the permissions department of the publication and look into getting permission to reprint, or having reprints made. Consider sending the article to your membership, supporters, or anyone whose goodwill you depend on. Positive coverage can lend credibility to your cause, and if it reflects well on the institution at large, it can serve you well the next time you're in a tight spot.

## BUILDING VALUABLE RELATIONSHIPS

It goes without saying that the media are not your enemy; in fact, a good relationship with a reporter can serve you just as well, professionally speaking, as a good relationship with a colleague.

To nourish this relationship even when there's no breaking news, be creative:

- Invite a reporter to lunch for a background briefing on some of the issues important to your organization.
- Invite a reporter to your library/university/facility for a tour (if appropriate) and to meet key players.
- Create an email list of reporters who have asked to be kept current on your organization, and send out monthly or bimonthly items of note.
- Give a particular reporter a scoop, and the opportunity to write up your story before anyone else.

### HINT:

**Maintain relationships with the media even when there is no breaking news.**

## CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

### *Scandal. Disaster. Intrigue.*

Call it what you will. But if suspense, uncertainty and danger are part of the picture, someone will probably want to write about it. And if you're not fast enough – with the truth or simply with your side of the story – what was a crisis could turn into a catastrophe for your organization.

### **Remember the Ford Explorer/Firestone tire fiasco?**

### **Remember the Exxon spill in Prince William Sound?**

There are a multitude of good and bad reasons an organization isn't forthcoming in times of crisis. To avoid having to pick up the pieces of your reputation afterwards, remember these important points:

- **Respond quickly during a crisis.** Don't let the rumor mill and unauthorized sources fuel a story.
- **Appoint a spokesperson to handle media calls.** A high-level staff member should be proactive about making known your point of view. This person needs to be out in front of the media (or your members or patrons) with a clear, consistent and truthful story. This spokesperson can send out email statements, distribute press releases, or phone reporters with your side of the story.
- **If appropriate, hold a news conference.**
- **Keep the community, members of your organization, and supporters informed of your efforts and your position.** Hold in-house meetings if necessary. Internal morale is just as important as external media relations. Reassure staff that you're on top of the problem, in case they are tapped by reporters.
- **Tell the truth.**
- **Develop a crisis communications plan before the need arises.**

# AVOIDING COMMON PITFALLS

“I try to have respect for people in general, whether it’s baseball players or lowlifes like the media.”

Jim Riggleman, Chicago Cubs Manager

“Verbosity leads to unclear, inarticulate things.”

Vice President Dan Quayle

## Everyone makes mistakes.

But when your mistakes are broadcast in print, they’re with you forever. The surest way to make a mistake with the media is to go in unprepared. If you think that you’re ready for your media debut, you may very well be. **But the following checklist, which details common pitfalls, should help you in your final quest for the summit.**

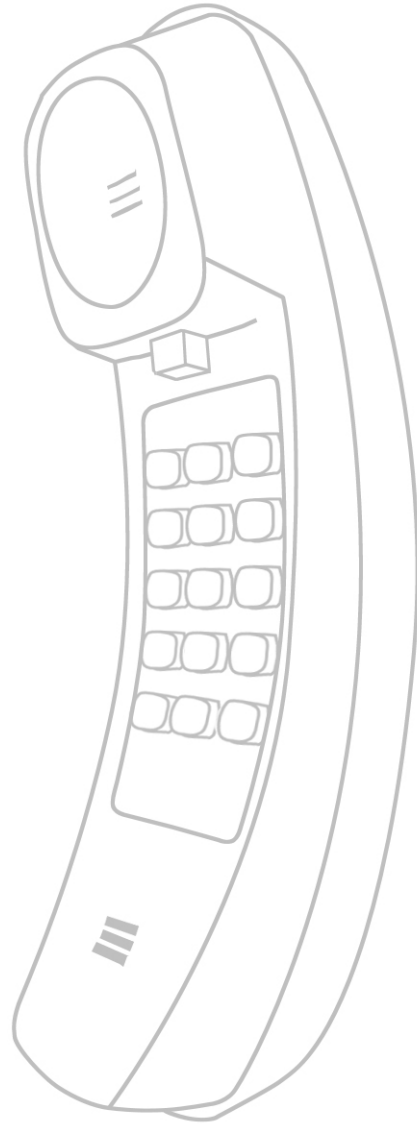
- ✓ **Misunderstanding the Media.** In an interview you walk the line between being a commercial for your organization/product/service and selling the reporter on the value of the issue. Reporters hate to be thought of as your conduit to free advertising. Their job is to provide interesting and useful information to their readers. An interview is not a sales call. Keep this in mind, and help them do their job as you represent your organization in a positive light.
- ✓ **Failing to Listen.** Don’t interrupt the reporter; finish listening to his or her question before you answer, and if you’re unclear about their question, ask them to clarify.

- ✓ **Lacking Message Points.** Key message points are critical if you are to build a brand or facilitate consistent media coverage. All spokespeople in your organization should deliver interviews which hit on the same few basic messages. This also helps prevent giving the reporter a “My Organization 101” course, which they probably do not want.
- ✓ **Over-Answering.** Keeping answers to the point helps assure that you are staying within the reporter’s area of interest, and reduces the chances that you will be misquoted. Over-answering also increases the possibility that your most important points will be lost.
- ✓ **Speaking in Jargon.** Remember that the reporter likely has zero background in the issues you’re relating, and even if he/she does, the readership doesn’t. Avoid acronyms and speaking over the reporter’s head. It’s perfectly reasonable to ask at the beginning of the interview how comfortable the reporter is with this issue, or what kind of background he/she has in it.

## There are no small interviews, only small interviewees.

Whether your interview is with a campus newspaper, an association bulletin, an industry trade magazine or a major metropolitan daily, you should treat it with equal care. You never know if a *New York Times* reporter will see your item in a trade magazine and decide it fits into a trend piece they’re working on. And in the electronic age, almost all news stories are accessible on the Web, bringing you a worldwide readership. Be mindful as you map your media strategy, and your audience will come to you.

# NOTES



# NOTES

