

**Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About:**

# **Getting the Press to Cover Your Campaign**

**By Joe Garecht**

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Your Guide to Winning Local Elections**

# **Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Getting the Press to Cover Your Campaign**

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Getting press coverage for a political campaign can be a daunting task. This is doubly true for local campaigns, which are forced to compete with much larger races for a reporter's time. With a good earned media plan, however, even local campaigns can garner some free publicity and credibility by getting the press to cover their campaign.

## **What is Earned Media?**

Simply put, earned media is any publicity that your campaign generates, but which it does not have to pay for. Earned media is any type of press coverage you garner, including television, print, radio, etc. It is called "earned" media because rather than paying to have your campaign featured in the media through commercials or advertisements, you "earn" the coverage through a newsworthy event, act, message or media opportunity.

Gaining press coverage is important to every campaign because of the many benefits it provides. First and foremost, it is free. Earned media puts your campaign on the airways or in the newspaper and reaches thousands or tens of thousands of voters' homes without the campaign having to pay for an ad. While this is a great benefit for large campaign, as often as not local campaigns can't afford any broadcast advertisements at all, and thus must rely on earned media to get them on the airways. With the rising cost of advertising on the air or in the paper, every campaign needs a clear strategy for garnering press coverage for their candidate and their message.

The second reason earned media is so important is because it is so credible. When voters see a campaign advertisement, they take it with a grain of salt – it was paid for by the campaign, so of course it is biased. But when voters see a news piece about the candidate, they trust it. They see the candidate on the news, and think he or she is important, because of the press coverage. If the story is a positive one, all the better, because it is being reported by an "objective" source.

## **It Ain't Easy Gettin' Press**

Getting earned media isn't easy, especially for local campaigns. Because of all the benefits outlined above, every campaign will be vying for press coverage. Even presidential campaigns sometimes have trouble garnering press – this is all the more true for a city council race that has to compete against mayoral, state legislative, or federal campaigns for a small piece of the earned media pie.

Receiving media attention is also difficult because in order to survive, the media needs to jealously guard its credibility and trust with the voters. This means that the media will only report "newsworthy" items, and is wary of appearing to favor some candidates

above others. For the campaign, getting “good press” presents a challenge that can be overcome through a well-planned and executed earned media strategy.

### **The Number One Rule for Getting Press Coverage**

The single most important rule for getting the press to cover your campaign is that you must “create news.” What most campaigns fail to understand is that just because they say something is newsworthy doesn’t make it so. The only events, announcements, statements, speeches or other items that the press will cover are those that are newsworthy.

Of course, determining just what is newsworthy can be hard. There are no set rules, and what is newsworthy in one campaign will not be news in another – the qualifications vary with the race. Below are some questions you should think about when determining whether or not your news is newsworthy:

- Is it exciting to people who aren’t following the campaign?
- Is it emotional?
- Is it embarrassing to your candidate or your opponent?
- Are you pointing out a problem?
- Are you offering a solution?
- Is it completely out of the ordinary?
- Does it create a unique visual?
- Does it create conflict?
- If someone saw this on the news, what would his or her reaction be?
- If I saw this on the news, and I didn’t know anything about the campaign, would I want to tell people about it?
- Does this have local appeal?
- Will this appear self-serving?

Remember – the media needs news to survive. Reporters have to have a constant stream of newsworthy items to report on or else they are out of a job. Be the media’s friend – offer them true news, and they’ll be more than happy to report it to their viewers and readers, thus garnering free, credible publicity for your campaign.

### **Setting Up Your Press Operation**

If garnering press coverage is a goal of your campaign (and it should be), then you need to commit campaign resources to developing a strong press operation.

One of the most important commitments the campaign needs to make is delegating to one person (and only one person) the responsibility of dealing with the press. This person, often called the press secretary, communications director, or media director, works closely with the candidate and campaign manager to develop and implement the campaign’s earned media strategy.

Many local campaigns can't afford to have a full time press secretary on staff. If this isn't possible, it's o.k. to use a committed volunteer, or have the campaign manager also function as the press secretary. Just be sure that the person chosen has good communication skills and is able to make the time commitment that the campaign requires.

It is imperative that one, and only one person has the responsibility of dealing directly with the press (in addition to the candidate). The press secretary should make every media request, story proposal, or campaign statement. This prevents the campaign from getting into trouble by making silly mistakes or conflicting statements when dealing with the press.

Because the earned media strategy will be an essential part of the campaign plan, the press secretary should be included, when possible, in campaign strategy sessions. This will ensure that the earned media strategy is completely integrated into the campaign's overall workings. In addition to sitting in on strategy sessions, some of the press secretary's other responsibilities may include:

- Implementing the campaign's media strategy.
- Garnering positive coverage for the candidate.
- Arranging press conferences and news events.
- Preparing press releases, statements and newsletters for the campaign.
- Serving as a spokesman on television or radio.
- Briefing the candidate on press issues before appearances.
- Handling media requests.
- Scheduling interviews and appearances for the candidate.

Depending on the amount of earned media work being generated, the campaign may also want to utilize volunteers to help the press secretary run the press operation. While there are many tasks that these assistants can perform, it should be made clear to them that they are never, under any circumstances, to speak for the campaign or the candidate, and that all press inquires should be forwarded to the press secretary.

## **Running Your Press Operation**

One of the most basic ways to succeed in garnering press coverage is to build solid media relations. It is up to the press secretary (and the candidate) to make sure that the campaign "gets along" with the press. Never, ever go into a campaign with the idea that you will be confrontational with the press. It just doesn't work. Either you won't garner any press at all, or you will receive only negative press. Make nice with reporters, and they'll make nice with your campaign.

The way to be on good terms with the media is to build a solid relationship based on trust. It takes lots of hard work to get the media to trust you, but once they do, you will see the positive effect it has on the quantity and quality of your press coverage.

## **Develop A Media List**

The first step to building positive media relations is to develop a complete media list. The media list should include as much information as possible on the various news outlets that may cover your campaign. The list should include daily, weekly, and monthly magazines, newsletters, and newspapers, as well as television, cable, and radio stations in your district.

You not only want to keep track of what news outlets may cover your race, but also who is responsible for covering politics or your campaign, how the outlet operates, what their news deadlines and editorial policies are, who the supervisors are and who makes decisions on what news gets reported. For broadcast stations, you should also try to determine what technical capabilities they have, so that you can prepare events and press conferences that meet their needs. Be sure to keep your media list up-to-date.

## **Dealing With the Press**

It is important that your campaign has a plan for dealing with the media. The plan should dovetail with your campaign plan, and it is based on the message that you are trying to communicate with the voters. Remember, while the press is important, they are only a means to an end. Your ultimate goal is to get your message to the voters in a credible and cost-effective way so that they decide to vote for your candidate on elections day.

## **Contact!**

Most campaigns try to contact the key members of the media early in the election cycle. This first contact serves as a good “get-to-know-you” session. Generally, the candidate calls or visits the key media players and lets them know he is running and makes a good first impression. The candidate and press secretary should plan on keeping in contact with the media from that first visit through the campaign. It’s important to contact the media when you have a great story for them, but it is equally important to stay in contact during the “lulls.” This can take the form of informal lunches or get-togethers or more formal meetings with the candidate and reporters, keeping the campaign at the forefront of the local media conscience.

The number one way to build trust with the media is to always be a reliable source of information and news. The press secretary should constantly feed the press valuable news information and must be professional, responding promptly to press inquiries and honest with reporters, producers and editors.

## **Dealing With Problems**

No matter how well planned and professional the press operation is, from time to time problems with the press will arise that must be dealt with in a practiced manner. The campaign may feel that it has been treated unfairly or misquoted, or that an error has been

made. If so, the campaign may decide to let the matter slide (if it isn't important). The campaign needs to respond:

- Be calm. Never pick a fight with a reporter.
- Start with the reporter. If you don't get anywhere with him, you can move up the line to his editor or supervisor, but remember, you may be making an enemy
- Ask for a correction – not a retraction.

### **Focus Your Message**

It's your campaign's job to serve up stories to the media that are focused on your message and the issues you want to concentrate on. As we said, the press won't cover a self-serving story just because you put it out there. Instead, you must come up with news stories that are focused on a specific "angle" – present that angle to the press and if the story is newsworthy, they'll eat it up. In order to present a story that concentrates on your message:

- Focus on only one main point or issue in each contact with the press.
- Make it easy for reporters to cover your story – give them a news item that truly is news, but which suggests the message of your campaign.
- Back it up! Provide reporters with the evidence they need to report on the problem you have found or the solution you are proposing.
- Make sure your story/news fits in with the image and message you want to convey to the voters.
- Use quotable lines that you plan beforehand.
- Use every means at your disposal to get your message / story angle across to the media.
- Consistency counts – make sure every message you convey to the press is consistent with previous messages, your campaign theme, and your overall strategy.

### **How to Get Press Coverage – It's Not a Secret**

As you can see, there's no secret formula or hidden password you need to use to get the press to cover your campaign. Instead, it comes down to hard work. Hard work planning your earned media strategy, hard work creating news that truly is newsworthy, hard work staying in contact and having a positive relationship with the local press. Put these elements together and even the smallest local campaign can get some free, credible coverage from the local media.

For more information and resources on winning elections, be sure to visit Local Victory on the web at:

**[www.localvictory.com](http://www.localvictory.com)**