

Using the Media

The media is powerful in all our lives. It is infinitely more powerful in the lives of our legislators. Used effectively, a media strategy can reinforce your work in Salem when major policy issues are involved. Because of legislators' unique sensitivity to the media, any public comment or publicity needs to be part of a larger media strategy.

Much like successful legislative work, an effective media strategy depends on building relationships. Media tools include press kits, news releases, op-ed articles/guest editorials, editorial meetings, establishment as a resident "expert," and participation in community forums. Together, they add tremendously to the power of your legislative message.

Most law improvement projects will not usually be of great interest to the media. However, Kateri Walsh, OSB media relation coordinator, would be happy to work closely with any group or individual in developing a more comprehensive plan for working on specific topics which may have media involvement.

Here are some media tips!

- Don't trump your legislator. In fact, the legislature should be your first point of contact, and media conversations should flow from those communications, not vice-versa.

Rule no. 1 is to not grandstand with the media in any way that trumps the efforts of the legislators who have the power to advance - or table - the larger agenda.

- Prepare your legislator. Nothing that comes from you or your office should come as a surprise to any of the legislators you have contacted.
- Develop one or two key messages, and keep coming back to them. Most of the issues you'll be commenting on are complex. But most news stories have a finite capacity for complexity. You will stay on track if you have one or two messages that you focus on consistently throughout a conversation, or communication.
- Repeat, repeat, repeat. The rule in media is that nothing reaches the public consciousness until it is presented at least three times. Establish your key message, but then find multiple ways of presenting it to the media. Keep it fresh.
- Don't speak off the cuff. If you get an unsolicited call from a reporter, don't feel like you have to talk with them at that moment. Ask them what their deadline is, and offer to call them back. It gives you an opportunity to develop your key message and language, and think through the potential questions and implications. If appropriate, you can even call your legislators and chat with them about their public priorities prior to shaping your response.
- Be consistent as you move from legislative to media communications. From a public relations standpoint, it can be tempting to alter your message slightly depending on the audience. Don't tell your legislator one thing, and then alter it for presentation to the media. It impacts your credibility with Salem, dilutes your message, and adds fuel to the other side of the issue.
- Tie news releases to a hard news angle. Soft news stories and features can be quite effective in making an issue "real" to the public. But whenever possible, tie your message to hard news. Find a study that's recently out that reinforces your message. Provide hard, tangible numbers to illustrate your point of view.
- Plan your responses to the toughest potential questions. You have two goals: to establish your expertise on a topic; and to present yourself as a citizen who wants to help facilitate public discussion. Don't appear to get agitated if questions get tough. It's part of facilitating the discussion. Have your responses ready, preferably in the form of some hard numbers, statistics or facts. Avoid emotional arguments. And keep coming back to your key messages.
- Know the media outlet before meeting with them. Particularly in dealing with print media, or with radio talk shows, be aware of the institution's or the individual's bias prior to talking.
- Eliminate all legalese. Simplify the issue - and your language - to its simplest components. Understand that the reporters did not attend law school, and their readers/audience often didn't attend college, or even high school. Be patient if the issue requires some lengthy explanation. Everybody's better off ensuring that the reporter gets it right before you leave.
- Provide a list of further contacts that will reinforce your message. Reporters want to have a list of recognized "experts." Make it easy on them. Provide them with names, phone numbers, and titles or other reason for their expertise.

