



Working Effectively with the News Media

Journalists are busy people under constant deadline pressure. This means that communications aimed at journalists must be timely and appropriate. A good idea is to link your outreach to a newsworthy story or event. World Water Day and World Water Week provide excellent opportunities to approach journalists, especially a few weeks in advance when they are planning their stories.

In the larger newspapers and radio and TV stations, there may be several reporters who cover local or business issues. The secret to working with the media effectively is to find the right journalists and editorial writers and understand their subjects (“beats”), deadlines and interests. This means carefully reading local newspapers, listening to radio programs, and viewing TV newscasts to find out who is covering the appropriate issues and what type of information their stories convey.

Normal rules of conversation do not apply during interviews or briefings. This means you should feel free to repeat key points, restating them in different ways. It also means that there is no such thing as “off the record” – anything and everything you say to a reporter helps shape his or her understanding of the issues and opinion of you and your organization.

DO

- Always tell the truth. If there’s something so sensitive that you cannot share it, tell the reporter, “I’m sorry but that’s confidential.”
- Be accurate. If you don’t know, don’t guess. Tell the reporter you will try to find the information and then get back to him or her as soon as you can.
- Know your subject backward and forward, especially the local, regional or specific aspect of the key message you are trying to communicate. Prepare, rehearse, and prepare some more until you feel comfortable talking about the topic.
- Begin with your most important arguments, briefly and directly. Then elaborate on the key points.
- Learn how to “block and bridge,” an interview technique in which you

control the direction of the dialogue. For example, when a reporter asks a question that is likely to take you off track, answer it in the simplest, briefest terms, and then add, “That raises a far more interesting question about the importance of water” or “...about our local water infrastructure” which will allow you to return to your main points. (Practice this with friends and family.)

- Be succinct – short, to-the-point responses and statements are preferred. (Use the Water Is Life, and Infrastructure Makes It Happen™ talking points to rehearse.) This is especially important for radio and TV interviews where time is limited.
- Be cool – pause before answering any question to ensure you’re not angry, defensive or insensitive when you reply.
- Be straightforward and sincere. Avoid attitude.
- Listen carefully – if you’re not sure about a question or an assertion, ask the journalist to repeat it.
- Follow the ground rules – respect journalists’ deadlines, the time allotted for radio or TV interviews or other limitations or conditions on the interview. You should inquire about any ground rules before the interview.
- Above all, be friendly and helpful. You are trying to persuade a journalist that your issues, views, organization and positions are important and valid.

DON’T

- Answer just “Yes” or “No” to a question, but provide a brief explanation of why that is the answer.
- Use industry jargon.
- Mislead.
- Go “off the record.”
- Try to be funny – humor is likely to be confusing or even backfire when dealing with the media.
- Answer hypothetical questions – Say, “That’s a hypothetical situation, and I can’t answer it. But what’s really important about water (or water infrastructure) is...”
- Allow a journalist to force you to choose between two unacceptable options. Tell the reporter, “I can’t accept the premises of your question”

and bridge to your message points. Or, rephrase the question before answering.

- Finesse an answer if you're not sure about key information or details.

BUILDING A SOLID MEDIA RELATIONS FOUNDATION

Here's the step-by-step process for developing a solid media foundation:

1. Build a media database by noting the names of reporters who cover water and infrastructure issues, including environmental, public health and business stories.
 - a. The list should include relevant reporters, columnists, editorial writers, and for radio and TV, editors, news directors and producers.
 - b. Media should include the daily newspaper, weekly paper (including a local business journal), TV news departments, radio news departments (especially at all-news or news-talk stations and the local public radio affiliate).
2. Develop core local materials including the likely contents of a press kit, using the templates provided by Water Is Life, and Infrastructure Makes It Happen™, including:
 - a. Key backgrounders
 - b. News releases
 - c. Letters to the Editor
 - d. Op-ed pieces
3. Familiarize and rehearse the spokesperson regarding all aspects of the issue using the Water Is Life, and Infrastructure Makes It Happen™ media briefing template, backgrounders, internal Q&A, PowerPoint presentation and other materials as necessary.
 - a. Develop a concise (60 second) introductory explanation of the importance of water and the infrastructure issues facing your community and the nation.
 - b. Develop a water infrastructure soundbite of 7-12 seconds regarding the issue and another regarding the pending legislation for use with radio and TV reporters.
 - c. Prepare for all likely (and even unlikely) questions, the possibility of hostile questions ("What will all this cost and who will pay for it?") or even outright disagreements.
4. Using the calendar or water dates and anniversaries provided by the program, and your own local water events, create a comprehensive calendar of water-related activity to use as "triggers" for contacting the media. Once the foundation is built, it's time to reach out to the media.

MEDIA OUTREACH STEP-BY-STEP

Background Briefings

Informational sessions educate the journalist about water and infrastructure issues, and possibly pending legislation. Background sessions are an important tool in building awareness. Typically, sessions are requested by the spokesperson and include a brief presentation or overview by the spokesperson and a Q&A. Briefings may include more than one journalist and may take place over breakfast or lunch. Typically, a background briefing does not involve breaking news, but focuses on a developing story, event or issue.

The Water Is Life, and Infrastructure Makes It Happen™ presentation documents (located under the toolkit tab) will be helpful in preparing for background briefings. They can be adapted to the local or regional water infrastructure situation.

A step-by-step approach to media outreach may include the following:

1. Determine which journalist(s) you wish to contact and review recent, relevant articles, columns or editorials written by the journalist(s). Develop a database with all contact information available by contacting the publication. Familiarize yourself with the journalist's point of view.
2. Send a request for a meeting to the journalist(s). Follow up by phone the next day, and lock in an appointment at the reporter's office or other place of his or her choice. Be prepared to convince the reporter of the importance and immediacy of the issue using local data and information about water and infrastructure.
3. Confirm the appointment the day before and arrive promptly the day of the meeting.
4. Begin the briefing by thanking the journalist for taking the time to see you. Open with a clear statement about the importance of water and infrastructure. Present clear, factual arguments as you describe the local situation, and the need for more public discussion of water and the water infrastructure.
5. Answer the reporter's questions, noting any that require additional research and follow-up.
6. Conclude by restating your basic position, and inviting the journalist to contact you any time he or she is working on a water-related story.
7. Thank the journalist for his/her time. Follow up with any information you promised to provide, and/or a brief note saying you appreciated working

with the journalist on this issue.

Editorial Board Briefings

The editorial page staff of most newspapers is quite separate from the reporting staff. An editorial board briefing allows an organization to present its views and concerns to the writers who shape the paper's official position on particular issues. Editorial board briefings are very important, although they may not result in immediate coverage or editorial space for several weeks or even months.

The basic steps in obtaining a background briefing apply for editorial board briefings: know which editor (or for larger papers, editorial writer) you need to speak with, and read all their editorials on water, infrastructure, public health and the environment that appeared over the last year. Note that for many papers, the editorial page editor handles editorial boards.

Editorial boards last at least a half-hour, and may often run a full hour. In some instances, reporters may be invited to participate, so don't be surprised if you face as few as one person or as many as four or five. A step-by-step approach to organizing an editorial board briefing may include the following:

1. Thank the editorial board for agreeing to meet you, and make sure you obtain names (and titles) for everyone in the room (ask for their business cards).
2. Begin with a 3-5 minute statement of the issues and their importance to your community. Cite local data and information whenever possible as you explain that water and infrastructure issues are a national problem as well.
3. At this point, you may be interrupted by questions. If so, conduct a lively, on-message discussion.
4. If not interrupted, proceed with a more detailed, 10-minute explanation of the issues and their local impacts. Relate infrastructure to economic growth, new housing or commercial development projects, and public health in your area. If you have fact sheets or issue backgrounders that make these points, you can distribute them at this time. Conclude by tying the issues to the pending legislation.
5. Ask them for their questions. Following the discussion, restate your position and ask the editorial board to consider writing about the issues.
6. Let them know you are available if they have further questions and thank them for the opportunity to meet with them. Follow up with any information you promised to provide and with thank you notes to all participants.

Letters to the Editor

Letters to the editor are concise, e-mailed responses to a newspaper's coverage (or lack thereof) regarding a breaking news story, or to a column or editorial. These letters are a rapid-response mechanism that allows an organization or an individual to share views and opinions with the newspaper (or radio or TV station). A model letter to the editor is provided under the toolkit tab on the Water Is Life, and Infrastructure Makes It Happen™ website.

Letters to the editor usually appear on the editorial page, and most papers have a letters editor to whom letters should be directed. Please note that some publications publish letters in other sections, such as the Sunday business section, and these additional venues should be considered when appropriate (such as responding to a business story).

Letters to the editor should be short – three or four paragraphs at most, and should be directly tied to the paper's coverage (or lack thereof) of water and infrastructure issues. Today, letters are typically e-mailed to a daily publication on the same day that the story in question appeared. At the latest, they should be sent the following day. For weekly media, such as a city business journal, the letter should be sent no later than 48 hours after the story appeared.

Op-eds

Thoughtful, provocative essays about current issues, op-eds are often submitted by experts or opinion leaders. You may consider working with local officials or third-party experts such as a local professor, civic leader or health official to submit op-eds.

Op-eds are usually sent to the editorial page editor. For developing and placing your own op-ed a step-by-step approach may include:

1. Determine which editor at your largest daily newspaper should receive the op-ed, and then obtain the correct contact information.
2. Use the Water Is Life, and Infrastructure Makes It Happen™ template provided or write your own, highly localized version, filling in the blanks with local information.
3. E-mail the piece, noting that you are also sending a hard copy by mail or messenger. In your cover note, link the op-ed to any recent coverage of water or infrastructure issues.
4. The next day, follow-up by phone to make sure the op-ed was received. (Note your call may be directed to an assistant to the editor.)
5. After a week, call again to encourage the use of the op-ed. Ask if it has been read, and if they might require any changes. Emphasize the

importance of the issue to your community.

Interviews

The most familiar form of interaction with the media, the interview is often requested by the journalist. Interviews may begin with a brief statement by the spokesperson, but then quickly change into a question and answer process, as journalists use interviews to elicit specific information that sheds light on a story.

You may seek out interviews or be contacted by a reporter for a story he or she is developing. Whenever a reporter asks for an interview consider this step-by-step approach:

1. Ask the following “core” questions:
 - a. What is the topic?
 - b. How long will the interview take?
 - c. Will it be handled over the phone or face-to-face?
 - d. What is the reporter’s deadline?
 - e. When will the story likely appear?
 - f. Who else has been interviewed?
2. If the deadline is not immediate, tell the reporter you cannot talk at that moment and ask if you can call him or her in an hour or two. Use the time allotted to prepare for the interview. Review recent stories by the reporter to determine his or her perspective on the issues.
3. If it is a phone interview, feel free to spread your materials out where you can easily see them. Offer to send a press kit to the reporter to help shed light on the issues.
4. If the interview is in-person, with the reporter coming to your office, prepare a kit of the most relevant materials for the reporter, and feel free to use the materials to explain your position.
5. Follow the do’s and don’t’s outlined earlier in this section.
6. Conduct the interview for the specified time – unless the questions become repetitive. If you feel the reporter is repeating questions to try to “get you,” simply say, “I think we’ve gone over that subject sufficiently. If you have no further questions, I have to get back to work.”
7. Thank the reporter for the interview opportunity. If you agreed to send any materials, do so immediately by fax, e-mail or for a full kit, by messenger.

News Releases

The key to the success of a news release (or a news conference) is that there must be news, that is, something new to report. News releases should be written

as the news story. It often contains a direct quote (or two) from a local spokesperson or a third-party ally. Releases are typically sent to the media electronically, via e-mail, fax or wire service. A press release example can be found under the toolkit tab of the Water Is Life, and Infrastructure Makes It Happen™ website. To issue a release:

1. Using the media database developed as part of the foundation for the program, identify news organizations and reporters to whom the release will be sent.
2. Follow-up by phone with reporters to inquire if they need additional information or have questions.

Press Kit

A compilation of documents relating to the issues, the press kit includes the news release, an issue backgrounder, a brochure or backgrounder on the Water Is Life, and Infrastructure Makes It Happen™ program, a brief bio of the spokesperson, a summary of the legislation, a fact sheet about local infrastructure concerns, and contact information. The kit may be given to journalists at a briefing or interview, or news conference. Press kits are usually contained in a pocket folder. Kit contents can be available online as well.

Water Is Life, and Infrastructure Makes It Happen™ press kits should combine materials from the national program with local materials. The goal of the kit is to provide journalists with a handy, readily used overview of the water and infrastructure debate. Press kit materials can be downloaded from the www.WaterIsLife.net website.

As a rule it is not recommended to send the kit to reporters, unless specifically requested. Rather the kit should be used to supplement briefings and interviews, with the spokespersons identifying key kit elements and explaining their importance. Generally, a kit should never simply be handed to reporters in one-on-one situations.

Developing a press kit is fairly straightforward:

1. Utilizing the templates provided by Water Is Life, and Infrastructure Makes It Happen™, assemble the materials required.
2. Include recommended national materials in the left hand pocket, and local materials in the right hand pocket where reporters will see them first.
3. Always place your current news release atop the materials in the right side of the kit, so that it is the first item a report sees.
4. Include any brochures, charts, graphs, photos, etc., in hard copy or on a

CD.

News Conference

A meeting with several journalists called by the spokesperson, a news conference should be held to deliver breaking news to media. News conferences should be reserved for truly important stories, and typically involve the distribution of a statement, news release or press kit. They should be scheduled in the morning to allow journalists to develop their stories during the rest of the day.

Advocacy Advertising

Paid advertising that supports a position or a particular policy, advocacy advertising is an effective way to call attention to an issue and a pending development. It has been an important tool for consumer groups and labor unions, as well as business coalitions and trade associations.

Public Service Announcements (PSAs)

PSAs are unpaid advertisements that are linked directly to the public good, such as seatbelt use, smoking cessation and anti-drug programs. PSAs often focus on public health matters, an important connection for the Water Is Life, and Infrastructure Makes It Happen™ program. They are made available at the discretion of the station.

Determine where you wish to place the ad or PSA. Contact the advertising manager or sales representative at the media organization. Obtain placement information including ad and PSA policies and deadlines for reserving space. There are a number of professionally developed print and TV PSAs available through the Water Is Life, and Infrastructure Makes It Happen program™ website that can be personalized for your community.

Water Is Life, and Infrastructure Makes It Happen™

Most of the media tools described have samples or templates located on the toolbox tab of the WaterIsLife.net website. They are designed to be models, to be modified and personalized to meet your community's situation. Feel free to take from them and to add your own suggestions and samples by contacting the program manager at WaterIsLife@wef.org.