

## WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

### Overview

Local media—newspapers, television, and radio stations—can be among your most effective communications channels. Coverage in local news has the potential to reach many target audiences, can add legitimacy to your work, and does not cost a penny, which is why it is called “earned media.” We know that not all small towns have a local newspaper or radio station. That’s OK. Follow the other ideas in the [Outreach and Communications](#) resource, and consider where and how groups within your community hear about local news.

The trick is to help local media tell your story. Every Community Heart & Soul™ project has several points, or “hooks,” that have the potential to be newsworthy to bring to the attention of local reporters or radio talk show hosts. Smaller announcements related to events that are not necessarily going to be front-page news are also important for people to know about. Ideally, the bigger stories and the smaller announcements contribute to **a steady flow of information about your Heart & Soul™ project**, raising awareness and creating (and sustaining) a positive impression.

### Build a Bridge to Local Media

How do you get the attention of local media? First, is there someone on your Heart & Soul Team or Communications Committee with connections to a local news director, publisher, editor, or reporter? If the answer is “yes,” great! That person can be a liaison, setting up a meeting early in the Heart & Soul process to talk about the project. This meeting is also a time to ask about the paper’s deadlines for media releases and other information.

If your team does not have personal connections to the media, call the editor or news director and request a meeting to introduce the exciting new project you are about to launch. Personal contact with local media is key, and should happen early and without the expectation of a story, at least not yet. Plan to follow up with meetings a few more times throughout the process, preferably as you approach a key milestone.

Take a press packet along if you have prepared one (see p. 5 for guidelines).

## WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

When you meet with local media here are some suggestions for questions to ask:

- What kinds of stories interest them?
- Is there a reporter who would be the best to cover this project?
- What are their press release submission deadlines?
- When is the best time to be in touch? How? Email, phone?
- Would they publish a photograph with a caption?
- What are their “Letters to the Editor,” editorials, and guest column policies?
- Would they consider a regular column on Heart & Soul, perhaps contributed by a Heart & Soul Team member? Maybe a column of townspeople profiles or history highlights tied to the Heart & Soul project would be of interest.
- Do they include flyers in their paper, for free or paid?
- Do they offer reduced nonprofit advertising rates?
- Do they have the capacity to become your local printer for flyers and posters?
- Are TV/radio stations willing to record and run Public Service Announcements? Listen to our [PSA Sample](#) for an example.

If you are not getting the coverage you hoped for, it is probably time for another meeting. Not to complain, but to seek advice on getting the word out and what you might do to get their interest.

By the way, dollars spent on advertising do not equate to news coverage. In other words, just because you bought a full-page ad to promote a Heart & Soul event, does not mean the paper owes you a story.

Establishing relationships with media people in your region is the first step toward getting the Heart & Soul message out consistently and reliably.

### Sending the Message

After personal connections to members of the media, a media list is the next most valuable tool in your media tool kit. Build a list of email addresses and phone numbers of key people in the local media. You'll use this to send out media releases that can serve your efforts in a number of ways, including:

#### Announcing events

Provide all of the necessary information—name of event, time, date, place, admission fee, contact person. Announce events with two goals in mind. 1. Alert the media so they can cover it. 2. Get a story, brief announcement, or calendar listing in advance of the event.

#### Following up

Even if a reporter didn't cover the event, you can still get the word out about what happened. You can quickly send out a press release and a high-resolution photo or two to go with it. "More than 100 people came together at the Community Center last night to attend a story-sharing session that is part of an ongoing Community Heart & Soul project here. Old timers and newcomers alike shared memories of Pleasantville and expressed their hopes for the future. ..." If your photo doesn't get picked up, you may still pique the interest of local reporters and get on their radar for a future story.

Here is a [Sample Media Release](#) sent out by the Orton Family Foundation.

For media release guidelines and templates, see [Cause Communications Toolkit](#).

### Pitching a story

During the Heart & Soul project, you will no doubt find yourself sharing stories with friends or family about something remarkable that has happened as a result of Heart & Soul. These are the types of moments that could be nuggets of news or "hooks" to catch a larger story.

Media are always looking for compelling stories about people in the community tied to current events.

#### Shed light on your successes

Maybe your team got the creative idea to print up drink coasters with the saying "Pleasantville: What's to Love? What's to Leave?" on them. You are distributing them in bars and restaurants and asking people to share their thoughts by writing on the back of them. You have gotten some great input. So tell the media. Find a restaurant owner willing to speak to the press and have a reporter, photographer, or camera crew come by when people are there. For TV, the story needs to be visual.

In this case, a TV reporter and camera crew could visit a restaurant and interview your spokesperson, a bartender, and patrons. Be sure to let reporters know how a particular event is part of the larger Heart & Soul project.

### **Announce a milestone**

News media love a culminating event or an anniversary. Think about ways to get publicity around the one-year anniversary of your project or when 200 stories have been captured or 20 community meetings held, and be prepared to talk about what comes next in the project.

### **Tell the story in photos**

A compelling image or images with captions can tell your story effectively and in an instant. Consider how to tell your story in pictures.

## **Letters to the Editor**

Don't overlook letters to the editor—letters pages are among the best read in many local papers. As always, think things through and be strategic. These pieces should be timely, locally focused, and tied to local events and news. Support your theme with details and evidence, and be sure to include your project contact information. Keep the following in mind:

- Make letters brief, direct, and to the point
- Rely on several volunteers to write letters
- Match letter writers to topics that interest them
- Comply with media outlets' Letter-to-the-Editor policies
- Avoid defensive or reactionary letters
- Include your contact information so the paper can verify the letter

## **Be prepared**

When you issue a media release or make a personal call to a reporter, be prepared to answer questions. Have one spokesperson ready and prepared to field inquiries. Anticipate the questions a reporter might ask and have answers written out. Have a clear sense of the main points you want to get across. If you don't get a chance to make those points, you can make them at the end of the interview by saying, "There's just one more point I'd like to make and didn't get a chance."

If you get a question you are not able to answer, say so and plan to get back to the reporter promptly with an answer. Providing accurate information is paramount.

We recommend against going “off the record” to tell a reporter something that you would not want to see in print or broadcast. For one thing, the line between when you go off the record and then come back on the record can be fuzzy. Some of what you intended to be confidential could appear in the story. A reporter may ask if he or she can use the information “not for attribution,” which means your name is not attached to it. This is also not recommended.

Transparency is the best policy when working with the media. Remember, you are talking to a reporter, but your audience is all of the readers or viewers who will get that information from the reporter. So be clear, concise, and stay on message and you’ll spread the word successfully.

## Media/Press Packets

When introducing your organization/project to the media, in person or not, a media packet can be helpful. Typically a packet (or press kit) consists of a pocket folder with the name of your organization on the cover. Make sure the content is relevant to the news you want covered.

Content can include:

- Brochure(s)
- Press release(s)
- Frequently Asked Questions sheet
- Fact sheet
- Contact sheet and/or business card
- Past press coverage (articles, opinion pieces, etc.)
- Quote sheet (What are people saying about you?)
- Heart & Soul Team member bios
- Project history and timeline with milestones achieved

Post the packet online with additional material, including earlier press releases, high-resolution photos, and published media articles.

Many organizations also use press packets for potential funders, sponsors, or other interested parties.

Building bridges to the media can seem like a daunting task, especially if no one on your team has personal ties to reporters, editors, or news directors. A good first step is to meet in person with

## WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

members of the media and introduce them to Community Heart & Soul. Learning about their needs such as deadlines and submission requirements, will go a long way towards getting coverage.

Finally, by keeping the media apprised of events, updates, and milestones achieved, you will no doubt build awareness and make your Heart & Soul project impossible to ignore!

# # #

(P.S. Three hashtags, as above, means “The End” on a press release.)