

Tool 3: Tips on Finding Local, Relevant Stories and Identifying, Recruiting and Preparing Appropriate Spokespeople

When you identify a good story to use in the media, take a moment to think about the best use for the story. While press releases are great tools for disseminating information and facts, they don't allow you to build real relationships with the media nor tell a broader story. While pitching stories to the media requires some skill and dedicated time to do effectively, it can yield more returns in the form of viewers/listeners/readers, depth of the story, emotional appeal, etc. than an objective press release can.

What makes a Good Media Story?

The cornerstone of media relations is timely, emotionally compelling and interesting stories. The *Every Body Walk!* collaborative relies on members and messengers, like you, to identify good stories to share with the media. So what makes a good story? Here are some key elements that the media use to determine if a story is a candidate for publicity.

There are six criteria that the media use to judge a story:

1. **Timeliness:** Did the news or events happen recently? If so, you have a better chance of getting the media's interest. Or are there issues in the news that a story could be tied to?
2. **Impact:** Does the story create impact in one person's life or within an entire community or the world? The broader the impact, the greater the appeal will be to the media. They want to cover stories that are relevant to a large segment of the population.
3. **Proximity:** For local news coverage, you need to consider if the story happened within the neighborhoods that the media outlet covers.
4. **Prominence:** Is someone involved in the story recognized as a celebrity, a notable politician or a well-respected community leader? Involving a person with some level of prominence makes the story more appealing to the media.
5. **Novelty:** Is there an unusual, previously untold or unexpected element to the story?
6. **Conflict:** The news is filled with stories of conflict. The media enjoy having conflict play out in their pages and airwaves. Does the story have some element of conflict and resolution that will make it interesting?

A good media story has at least one of these criteria, so use this list as a guide when reviewing your stories.

Developing a Story Arc

A "story arc" is a structure for developing compelling stories. It is broken into three sections: a beginning, a middle and an end. The stories that you develop and build out for use in the media should follow this structure. Here is what you should include in each of these sections:

Beginning: Establish the setting of your story and the key characters (whether they are individuals or other organizations or institutions). The beginning is where you give the audience key information that will allow them to imagine the story taking place—where it happened and to whom.

Middle: The middle section of your story presents the challenge or conflict with which your main character is presented. Here is where you explain the obstacle that your character needs or wants to overcome.

End: Unless your story is a tragedy, the end is where your character finds resolution and overcomes the obstacle. In the stories that the *Every Body Walk!* collaborative tells, the solution presented at the end will almost always be about walking or building walkable communities.

The goal of using a story arc is to illustrate the facts that you already know to be true about walking, but in a way that is more emotionally engaging and takes your audience on a journey they won't forget!

How to Identify and Recruit Spokespeople

As you talk and work with people in your community and within your organization, listen for good stories and passionate voices. When you find one, explain to the “storyteller” that your organization is likely to secure media coverage and you are looking for local voices to include. Ask if they would be open to working with you to share a quote or prepare key messages, and possibly speaking with a reporter on behalf of your organization.

If they are open to sharing a quote: Ask for their contact information and follow up with them to capture their story (which you will use as source material for a quote) and their role within the community (e.g., high school teacher, mayor, police officer, retiree, community volunteer, etc.). Pull out the most compelling statements in their story and write a short summary, including a quote from the person. Once you start to build a collection of stories and quotes, take a look at the types of community members represented and identify missing voices to add to the mix.

If they are open to speaking with a reporter: Schedule a time to sit down and work with them on media training. After they agree, examine the following items (listed below) to determine if they would make a good spokesperson for your organization.

- Their role and history with the organization and the walking movement: A good spokesperson is well informed about your organization's goals, activities and history.
- Their reputation with/within the community or other audience that will read/see/hear their interview or presentation in the media: You wouldn't want a convicted felon as the face of your organization, would you? (No!) Making sure that your spokesperson has a positive reputation with/within the community increases the likelihood that audiences will listen and respect what they have to say.
- Their knowledge and credibility balance with their communication skills: While it is important that your spokesperson is a good speaker, it is even more important that they are knowledgeable about the topic, credible as a representative of your

organization, and able to develop a good rapport with the media. You want a triple threat!

- Their comfort with speaking to media about the topic being discussed: If your spokesperson is uncomfortable speaking about a certain topic—and it's more than just pre-interview jitters—don't force them to do it. Find someone that can deliver your message with confidence and understanding of the topic.
- Their enthusiasm for the topic being discussed: Enthusiasm is infectious, and demonstrates to audiences that your spokesperson truly cares about and believes in what they are saying.
- Previous media experience: Practice might not make "perfect," but it can sure make you better! Spokespeople with previous media experience are better able to remain calm and deliver messages with confidence.
- Their ability to remain calm and use tactics like bridging and circling when confronted with difficult questions: A good spokesperson can intuit when a reporter begins a difficult or negative line of questioning, and can counteract it without becoming defensive, upset or flustered.

How to Prep Spokespeople for Media (Hint: Use this toolkit and the Every Body Walk! messages toolkit, too!)

Everything that your spokesperson needs to prepare for an interview with or presentation to the media is included in this toolkit and in the *Every Body Walk!* message toolkit—so share them and practice together!