

# Help Reporters Find You ...Before they Need You

**W**hen you get hungry, do you walk out to your yard or a nearby field and plant corn? Of course not. An empty stomach wants food in minutes, not months.

So it is with media coverage. When the need strikes, a reporter has to find the right news source for his or her story as quickly as possible. Will you be that source? It depends on whether you planted the seeds well in advance.

Getting into one of those directories of experts can help. But that's a little like being in the yellow pages--maybe you'll get a call, maybe you won't. Raise the odds in your favor by being proactive. How? Try these six steps.

1. Identify the media in which you would like to be featured.
2. Establish relationships with key reporters (only the journalists you really hope to work with) in those media.
3. Develop a backgrounder piece on you, your organization, or the particular issue, topic or problem on which you're working.
4. Send that backgrounder with a brief cover letter to those key reporters. (The letter can simply say you hope they'll keep the backgrounder on file as a resource,

and that you're available to talk the next time they write a piece on [your topic]. Mention that a copy is also available for them in electronic form on your Web site.)

5. Follow up with a very brief phone call or e-mail to make sure they got it--then leave them alone.

6. Update the backgrounder whenever your contact info--phone numbers, e-mail, mailing address, last name, title--changes; otherwise refresh the backgrounder periodically to reflect new positions, new resources, whatever the reporter might need to understand the story better. (This should not happen excessively; avoid papering them to death--you want this in their file...not their trash can.)

## What Goes In a Backgrounder?

- ✓ Title/headline
- ✓ Your organization's name, address, Web site
- ✓ Table of contents
- ✓ Key contacts - names, titles, phones (including cell & home numbers), e-mails
- ✓ One sentence description of your organization
- ✓ One paragraph summary that

sets your organization in a larger context

- ✓ The facts, issues, perspectives a journalist would find helpful in preparing his or her story. Keep any opinions you express brief, and label them as such. The backgrounder is meant to be a brief but substantive "report" offering information, insights, and often some simple statistics about a piece of the subject being researched by the reporter.

(Backgrounders are sometimes referred to as "editorial backgrounders," since these documents often simply go to the editor of a newspaper to be held in a subject file for future reference. When the newspaper wants to run an editorial about a topic, editors peruse the subject file for relevant facts and figures which help shape their understanding of and opinion about the topic at hand. The source of the backgrounder may or may not be referenced publicly by the newspaper.)

One more thing: It must pass the "Who cares?" test. Any information you offer the media should be interesting, newsworthy, and useful to their readers, listeners, or viewers.

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If you're an experienced writer you can certainly prepare a backgrounder yourself. You might not want to devote the time, though, so outsourcing the task can be a cost-effective option. Many companies hire a PR consultant for this task.

## **Distribution & Follow Up**

Once you have your backgrounder in hand, make it available on paper and via your Web site. Send the paper version to the right people at the right media outlets: the specific reporters and/or editors at those newspapers, TV or radio stations you know reach your target audience(s).

Alternatively, you can simply mail those media contacts a post card or brief one page announcement that directs them to your web page for the full text. This can obviously be a cheaper option, especially if your backgrounder is longer than several pages.

After you send the backgrounder, or the post card/announcement, make a brief followup call to verify its arrival. Try to call only in the morning...reporters are often rushing to meet deadlines in the afternoon. (The exception, of course: if you are returning their call!)

When you make that followup call, simply tell the reporter or editor who you are and refer to the title/headline on the backgrounder when you ask whether it arrived. Invite him or her to call you with any questions, say "Thank you for your time," and get off the phone. If you got voice mail, leave a message...but don't keep calling to make sure they got it if you don't

hear back. Reporters hate pests...just like you would...and for much the same reason: they're busy.

A word of warning: some reporters have expressed disdain for such follow up calls. So if you sense any hostility or impatience in the reporter's voice, courteously and quickly conclude the call by noting that you've apparently caught him at a busy moment and would welcome a call at his or her convenience.

## **What to Expect**

You might get a call someday. You might not. Don't take it personally. Understand that a backgrounder is just one piece of your communications process, and let it be...for awhile. You can send an update, or even an entirely different backgrounder, a few months down the road. It's a great tool to start with, however, and it can help you begin the process of planting "story" seeds and cultivating awareness about you and your organization among your targeted media.

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