

## **Tips for contacting the media**

With shrinking newspapers –both in staff and in pages – it can be increasingly challenging to get a news reporter interested in your story. Now more than ever, a story really has to have a hook, especially at larger media outlets. The hook is the news element and it needs to be timely. Stories might be all around you and you just don't realize it. Are you implementing a new and interesting educational program at your school? Are students going on a unique field trip or participating in a community project for a class? Do you have a student who has overcome a big obstacle to enroll at your school or be a part of a school's sports team? Do you have a staff member, student or parent volunteer who has had some sort of major accomplishment, or gained positive notoriety off campus? These are all prime opportunities to pitch a story to a local news reporter. Of course, don't forget to get briefs in local newspapers or community news sections of major dailies during Step Up For Students' application season. When graduation rolls around, the media is always in search of great graduation stories. Is there a graduate who really stands out? He or she could be the key to getting prime coverage of your school.

At the same time as major news outlets are struggling, some hometown news organizations are doing great things with a community journalism approach. This means that the smaller stories and the home-grown stories are easier to get covered by reporters who work for these organizations. Some newspapers and local television news stations feature a community board listing either in print, on air or online. Often, this is the place to run a little description about your school and showcase its highlights. These organizations at times will list even small school events in their events calendar or community news listings and the like. For example, in the Tampa Bay area, Patch.com has a pretty large presence and for each of their local Patch sites. They have a free school directory which lists information about schools, including number of students, academic highlights and whether a school has financial assistance.

Also consider pitching TV and radio news stations and education journals when appropriate. Many areas now have local new cable stations that thrive with community news.

### **It all starts with a media advisory**

1. A media advisory is often used to alert the media of when a specific news event will occur and invite journalists to attend. It is concise and answers the basic questions: Who? What? Where? When? Why? A news or press release is usually used after the event to inform the media what occurred - or any breaking news - in hopes of driving media coverage. This document should be written like a news story. Please see our examples of each back on the School Marketing Tools page.

### **Shopping your story/Media Contacts**

1. If you don't already have a media list for local news outlets in your school's area, you should create one to make it easier each time you try to pitch a story. Start with a Google search and

don't forget to see if there are smaller news organizations and community sections of larger daily newspapers. A lot of times it's easier to get stories in the local weekly publication rather than a major metropolitan daily newspaper. If your school is doing something innovative, perhaps an education journal or the like might be interested in covering your story.

### **Before you call**

1. Do your homework. Know whom you should contact. A reporter? An editor/producer? In most cases, probably the best person to get is the school (or community news) beat reporter, if the news organization has someone dedicated to those types of stories.
2. Decide if a phone call is the best way to make first contact. Editors, reporters and producers are inundated with email, so if you send one just realize the recipients might not read it. If you do send one, always follow up with a phone call within a day or two and refer to it. You can also email a media advisory or press release about your news. If you want a reporter to show up for a specific event, be sure to give them plenty of notice. A day ahead isn't usually sufficient time, but a month in advance is probably too much notice.
3. Know when to call. Don't call in the late afternoon or early evening as traditional deadline is approaching. Of course, with the web, many reporters have deadlines throughout the day. Be polite and mindful of their time. Ask if it's a good time. If not, when is?
4. Know your story. What is your pitch? Make notes of why you are calling. Have background information about your school prepared. Be able to provide other sources to a reporter, such as a teacher or student, who would be able to help tell the story you want told.
5. Don't be afraid to reach out to multiple media outlets. That way you have a better chance of getting coverage.

### **When making the call**

1. When you do call, introduce yourself and make sure your contact isn't on deadline, or otherwise busy.
2. Keep your message brief and be ready to answer questions.
3. Be open to having a news photographer or videographer on campus. If special permission slips are required if students are involved, be sure to have those filled out and ready to release.
4. At the close of the conversation, ask the editor or reporter if they need any additional information. If they do not, thank them for their time.

5. If your story will get coverage, ask when you can expect to see it in the paper or on television. Later, you can always link to the story or video from your school's website.