



M+R

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How to be cool as a cucumber when news breaks for your nonprofit

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EDITOR'S NOTE: If you're reading this to get ready for the next time your nonprofit has a breaking news opportunity, then you're on the right track! The secret to winning rapid response in the press is to prep your butt off weeks or months before there's anything to respond to. That's the only way you'll be ready to stand out in the chaos. Best of all, it won't even feel chaotic if you do it right.

In this paper, we'll talk you through the main things you can do before, during and after news breaks to make sure your voice is heard.

I. Before

The most successful breaking news moments we've worked on for our nonprofit clients begin way before the news is breaking. We do hours of research about the media landscape and then invest hours more in building up relationships between the reporters that matter and the nonprofit experts we want them to quote when s#!t hits the fan. Unless your spokesperson is a major voice or subject matter expert, you also need to do your homework and lay the groundwork.

Answer these 3 key questions to help your nonprofit be prepared for the next breaking news media moment:

A) Which reporters do we need to know us?

We've all been stuck with a lazy media list at some point. They're the pits. There's no worse feeling than being called





KATHRYN & HANAH


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if you ever want
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out by an editor who isn't sure why you're emailing them (i.e., *Teen Vogue* probably doesn't care about the latest Alzheimer's research).

Besides making life more difficult for reporters, sloppy media lists actually make life more difficult for you. To jump on a breaking news train, it's much better to have a focused media list with 10 reporters who write about your issue than a list of 100 reporters who might. This way, you can stay focused and up-to-date with what your key reporters are working on. Our golden rule of pitching press is that you have to know your reporters if you ever want reporters to know you.

Step 1: *Make a list.* Research the reporters at top national outlets and wire services who write about your topic. Sure, fancy journalism databases help, but a thorough Google News search will shine a light on who you're looking for. If your work is more regional, don't overlook the reporters at major dailies and local news bureaus.

Step 2: *Check it twice.* Don't let your list gather dust. It's never been easier to get inside the heads of the reporters you're trying to reach (thank you, Twitter!). Be sure you're reading their stories on a regular basis, scanning for new coverage, following their conversations on social media and blogs, and



taking note and making updates when people move on or off your issue's beat. You can also set up Google Alerts for specific reporters to help you track what they're writing and have it delivered to your inbox so you never miss a thing. Without a carefully watched shortlist of reporters, it will be almost impossible when news breaks to reach the right people in a timely manner.

B) What do we have to offer reporters?

Now that you have your reporters lined up, it's time to take stock of your assets. You need to determine what you can and can't offer to those reporters:

- **Spokespeople** – Who can speak to media? Is there a single organization head or are there other partners or expert voices that should be offered up? Are spokespeople media trained and well equipped to handle a breaking news situation, live interviews, and the tough questions that may come up?
- **Real Storytellers** – Who are the individuals – the real people – you work with on a regular basis that you would be able to connect media with quickly to put a human face on your issue?
- **Data** – What research and information can be shared that's unique to your organization? And do you have a media-friendly summary of those data points?
- **Visuals** – What high-res photos or B-roll footage do you have access to that you could share at a moment's notice?

When news breaks, you also need to understand what you can't

deliver. You never want to overpromise on an interview hookup or an offer up information and then leave a reporter in a tight spot – especially when they're on deadline. In journalism, karma is king and you want yours to be good!

C) How can we make a connection with a reporter?

It may sound so 20th century, but emailing the journalists on your shortlist to introduce yourself and see if you can set up a briefing call or coffee is still a great way to build a rapport with reporters. When you meet, you get to have a casual conversation with them one-on-one about who you are and what you have to offer. The goal is not to get a news hit the next day. Instead, these briefings will help put you top of mind when news breaks. It can also greatly increase the chances that they will open an email from you in breaking news moments or take your call when your nonprofit has something to say.

In addition to the initial briefings, share news and recent developments on your issue that they wouldn't necessarily know about or have time to track on their own. For example, do you know about a new report coming out or a congressional hearing? That's the kind of information that might be helpful to share and will keep you on the radar



Planning for breaking news moments may sound like an oxymoron, but it made a world of difference for the American Lung Association (Lung Association) in the fight to protect the Clean Air Act.

Most recently, in March 2014, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) finalized new cleaner car and gas regulations. In the weeks leading up to the big announcement, the M+R team worked hard to connect Lung Association spokespeople with key reporters who might cover the news.

We scheduled briefings with reporters in person and over the phone. And we emailed reporters a trail of relevant studies on health impacts and kept our ear to the ground on the anticipated announcement timing.

When the big day arrived, of course we worked quickly to stay on top of and share new information as it happened. But the bulk of our breaking news work had already been done. As a result, Lung Association data and spokesperson quotes made it into all major national outlets the next day, including: The New York Times, Associated Press, Reuters, The Wall Street Journal, USA Today, Bloomberg and Businessweek.





KEEP ANTIBIOTICS WORKING

Keep Antibiotics Working (KAW) is a coalition of health, consumer, agricultural, environmental, animal and other advocacy groups with more than 11 million members dedicated to stopping the overuse of antibiotics in livestock.

KAW knew the FDA was going to issue new guidelines about the livestock industry's use of antibiotics in animals but the agency was being tight-lipped about timing. So for months, M+R worked with the coalition to prepare for the announcement.

In December 2013, we got the call. Because of all the planning, KAW was able to go out right away that morning with a statement – not bad for a coalition!

This fast outreach resulted in dozens of stories in major outlets quoting KAW voices: CNN, Reuters, Politico, US News and World Report, USA Today, Washington Post and Forbes, as well as multiple editorials in papers across the country.

II. During

No matter how prepared you try to be, news can break at any moment and catch even the most veteran of PR pros flat-footed. While planning ahead can help mitigate some of the challenges that are bound to arise when news breaks, we don't always have that luxury. Government agencies don't tend to send out Save-the-Dates weeks before they break news.

The key steps we took to ensure KAW got the quote (see the cow on the left) can apply to your nonprofit's next rapid response opportunity:

Pull quotes and messaging ahead of time. When responding to a Supreme Court decision, city council vote, or government policy announcement, you must be prepared for a good, bad, or in-between result. Write pre-approved statements so you're ready for the best and worst.

Even if you're not 100 percent sure what you're going to say, you should still have your statement approved ahead of time and possibly share it under embargo with your key reporters. It's so important to remember that when news breaks, a good statement is better than a great-but-too-late statement. It's not an exaggeration to say that every minute counts so don't worry if your statement isn't perfect. Get it out.



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Conduct outreach and check in with reporters on timing.

Whenever you hear new (and reliable) gossip about a breaking news date or policy, pass it along to the reporters who are covering the issue and remind them about what you can do for them. Believe us, they'll appreciate the inside scoop and will be more likely to contact you for a quote or comment when it's time.

Check all the stories as they come in. With breaking or developing news, there are often wire stories that run and continue to be updated as the story develops. It's critical to monitor these outlets closely so that if an opportunity is missed when the story breaks, you can try to insert your organization's position into any follow-up coverage or updates that are written. If an article is on an outlet's website, don't assume it's too late for the reporter to add your organization's quote. They do it more than you'd think.

III. After

Yes, it's very acceptable to do a happy dance and catch your breath after you hit your breaking news response out of the park. But don't rest too long.

One of the best things you can do to maintain a healthy relationship with reporters is to stay engaged with them beyond breaking news moments. You wouldn't want someone talking to you only when they wanted something, would you?

Here are some easy tips to keep in mind after the storm:

- **Keep reading what they're writing.** Be sure you're always up to speed on reporters' coverage and potential changes. Stay on top of those Google Alerts and Twitter lists.
- **Give props where props are due.** When a reporter writes something striking and/or impactful, let them know via email or Twitter—even if it's not about your issue. Just be sure you're interacting in a genuine, personal, and thoughtful way.
- **Drop a line.** Leverage "soft news" moments like awareness days as an excuse to stay in touch. You can also send reporters a FYI note when there's movement on your issue. It doesn't have to be (and probably won't be) a news story, but it's a good way to stay in touch and show that you're on top of things.



ATEST

In June 2013, M+R worked with the Alliance to End Slavery & Trafficking (ATEST) around the release of the State Department's Trafficking in Person's Report. As a result of press outreach in advance of the report release, the M+R team was able to secure a number of media interviews ahead of time with ATEST's acting director – including The New York Times, Associated Press, and NPR – and generate positive coverage for the coalition once the report was released.

After the report was out, M+R continued to monitor coverage by all the reporters who had written about it. Half a year after the original report, we reached back out to those key reporters to let them know about National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month in January. In the emails, we mentioned their recent articles and our past work together. As a result, most of the journalists quickly responded and they all asked to be connected in June for the next annual report as well as any other big updates between now and then.

Conclusion

We hope these tips and examples give you some new ideas and insights for your own communications planning and execution. Going through all the steps before, during, and after a breaking news moment is a marathon. And when you finish and see how you were able to shape the public conversation in the media, it will feel so worth it.

If you have any questions about M+R's nonprofit media relations work, please contact Kathryn Frazier, Vice President, at kfrazier@mrss.com or Hanah Smith, Senior Strategist, at hsmith@mrss.com.