

## How to Plan a Press Event

One of the most common ways to get your message out to the media is to hold a press conference. If you decide to hold it, make it a success. You have to develop your press conference with material that is suitable for all media — print, television and radio. When you hold the press conference, don't stop working it until you are actually seeing news stories run on media websites. And even then, you can still do more to get better play. Work it, work it, work it. That's the bottom line.

### Step One: Making the commitment

The first question you need to ask is: "Should we even hold a press conference?"

Press conferences should be viewed as a high-risk, high-yield public relations strategy. High-risk because if you don't get good coverage, you could actually lose momentum, and lose an opportunity with the media — and everyone connected with the event will feel demoralized. High yield because if they're well thought out, creatively developed and aggressively pitched, you can get a lot of news coverage.

The decision to hold a formal press conference versus releasing news on paper (press release only) or even slightly less formal media availability should be made after considering the risk-yield equation. Our experience has taught us that there is a public relations "recipe" for a truly successful press conference, and we will usually consider a news conference if the news is:

- ▶ Truly newsworthy, i.e., timely and relevant to current events or trends;
- ▶ Of interest to more than 2 or 3 news outlets;
- ▶ Visually appealing for television coverage;
- ▶ Involving high-profile officials or other personalities (such as celebrities, public policy experts, noted researchers, uniformed officers, or other authority figures).

If a few of these essential elements are in place, then a press conference will have a much better chance of success. It will be easier for us to get the media to attend a press conference, and our clients will have a good chance of getting positive coverage in the media. Decisions to hold press conferences are fraught with risk however, and not to be taken lightly.

### Step Two: Planning the Press Event

Always talk through your concept with everyone on the team. Together, you can think through your event, strategize news angles, debate alternatives, and come up with the best approaches to generate media interest. If you plan it correctly, you won't have to wonder if the media will show up to your event — they'll be calling you to make sure they're getting full coverage.

Here are some key issues to consider as you are planning a press conference:

**Timing.** What is competing for news that day? Is there national, statewide or local news that might be expected to break that day? Can your event hold up as a priority to the news media? If your press conference occurs on a day when another high-profile story breaks, you could be relegated to the back pages of the newspaper, or to a 30-second voice-over at the end of the local newscast. Your goal is to hit the front page, and be the top story on the 6 o'clock news. If you don't have a good chance to get there, or at least close, then it's time to rethink your strategy.

**News value.** Remember, if the subject matter appeals to “everyone,” the media are more likely to be interested. That’s why health news gets covered, but news about the incidence of accountants wearing glasses doesn’t ... the number of accountants is too small for the general public to care about. But lots and lots of people drive a car, pay their bills, look for a doctor, get a mortgage, have kids, etc. So stories about those general interest issues are more likely to get covered. Look for the angle on your story that touches the everyday lives of people, and build your message around that.

**Speakers.** Sure you’ve got a lot of experts, but do you have a “real person”? Reporters thrive on interviews with the “man on the street,” “Joe Sixpack” or your average “soccer mom.” Think about ways that you can make this story more personal to viewers and readers. Look for a way to “put a face on the story.” That means a person who can speak from a real experience, putting an emotional touch on the information you are conveying. In general, this is a person or anecdote that could be the lead in a major daily newspaper, or the person who would actually be interviewed on camera. And that means you should have a compelling personal story that illustrates the larger problem, challenge or solution.

**Location.** In considering a location, you should consider two things first — can the media easily and quickly locate the event, and does it have visual interest for television coverage? In many state capitals and in Washington, DC, there are numerous “traditional” locations that the media can easily cover (National Press Club, Capitol, etc) For the most part, these locations have backdrops that television reporters can use for the cutaway shots they weave into the story for visual variety. In other markets, you need to identify locations that media are also used to covering, such as malls, sporting arenas, city commission chambers, key landmarks, etc. Here’s one way to find the right place: Ask the media. Use our media contacts to find out how the media in that market are most likely to respond to holding events at a mall, or on a bridge, or whatever. Sometimes, a different, quirky location will work great. But you will need to do extra legwork to make sure the logistics will work.

**Dissemination.** Depending on the sensitivity of the topic to be discussed, blast e-mail and fax the media and advisory well in advance of the event. But if you’re anticipating opposition or if it’s a controversial topic, you may want to wait until the day before. Take the time to read the papers and figure out an angle of interest to the reporters.

**Pitching.** Fear not the reporters! Pick up the phone and contact every reporter you e-mail or fax to. Newsrooms can be huge vacuums for information, and if your advisory didn’t hit the right person’s desk, no one is going to forward it for you. It’s your job to pitch the story and make sure reporters show up. Ask them questions if they say they’re not interested. Figure out how you can ensure they cover your event. Would they prefer we contact them after the event and put some of our folks on the phone with them? Would they be interested in material for a feature story at some future time? Keep notes and follow-up!

### Step Three: Holding the Event

It takes more than one person to host a press event. One person needs to lead the event. A different person should be present to handle logistics, take photos and notes, etc. Some of the things that people staffing a press event should do include:

- ▶ Introduce yourself to every reporter
- ▶ Write down every reporter and media outlet represented
- ▶ Take photos
- ▶ Pay close attention to everything being said
- ▶ Write down the questions the reporters ask
- ▶ Provide reporters with additional information and assist them in getting the interviews they need.

#### Step Four: Post-event activities

Your press event may be over, but your work should continue.

- ▶ Send an update, including photos, to all everyone involved in creating the event, detailing media turnout, questions asked, follow-up needed
- ▶ Check in with reporters to see if they need additional information
- ▶ Upload press release and collaterals to your website
- ▶ Send the release to reporters who couldn't be there
- ▶ Send release to interested third parties who might want to stay updated on client priorities (e.g., legislators, attorneys, etc.) with the client's permission
- ▶ Request television clipping service if budget allows
- ▶ If you get great coverage, obtain an original copy of the newspaper or broadcast for future use. You will be amazed at how often you need this!

If all goes well, savor your success!