

How to: Organize a press event

The time may come when your community has some hard news to convey related to your issue. Hard news is defined as a story in print or electronic media that is timely, significant, prominent and relevant. Press conferences are difficult to pull off unless you have real news to convey, but when you do, they can be a boon to your campaign in terms of getting your message out to the public and framing the issue for reporters and other media.

Before the press conference

You should start planning at least two weeks before the press conference is to take place.

STEP 1: Define the issue

Define the issue and key messages that you are trying to get out to the community. This needs to be summarized in 3-5 key points.

STEP 2: Schedule the date and time

You will need to determine a date and time for the press conference, and make sure it doesn't conflict with other press events or deadlines.

- Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays are the best days for press conferences, as reporters are more likely to cover your event. Sundays are good days to get TV coverage.
- The best time to schedule your press conference is between 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m.

STEP 3: Pick the site

Pick a site that provides visual interest and relationship to each topic, such as the state capitol building, city courthouse, or the local clinic. Make sure the site is easily accessible to the press, to increase the chances of more people showing up.

STEP 4: Select and train your participants

You should decide on one or two people to be spokespeople. They should be able to stand up to press questioning and scrutiny. Community leaders with high credibility may make effective spokespeople. Also include people from the community affected by the issue.

- Your AT will also have to decide on a moderator. He or she will be in charge of convening the press conference by introducing the issue and participants. The moderator also answers questions or directs them to the appropriate participants.
- Conduct a dress rehearsal. Speakers should have scripts to memorize the 3-5 key points, and to make sure to speak no longer than 3-5 minutes each. Have someone from your group play devil's advocate and see how participants respond.
- A suitable response to a tough or misguided question might be, "That's a good question, but it is not within the scope of this press conference. Our focus today is on..."

STEP 5: Contact the media

The first step is to create a comprehensive mailing list of assignment editors at television stations, news directors at radio stations and at major newspapers, and editors at weekly newspapers. Others you'll want to be sure to include on your list are reporters you have worked with before, your contacts in the media, and reporters who may have covered the issue in recent months. Ally organizations with press lists are good resources if you are starting from scratch. You also will want to have a press advisory prepared and mailed about 2-3 days ahead of time to inform the media about the press conference. A press advisory can be used for background information to your media contacts. The format is basically the same as that of a press release. See an example of a press release by clicking here.

STEP 6: Follow up with the media

After you have mailed the press advisories to the media, you will want to follow up your press advisory with phone contact to the major media outlets. Begin your telephone follow-up with the people you sent your press advisory to three days after it is sent. Also, follow up again the morning of the press conference.

STEP 7: Develop a press kit

A press kit is simply a folder of information to give reporters background information about your issue or program. Your press kit should contain the following:

- A list of press conference participants
- Background information about the issue (i.e. statistics, historical background, case histories)

- Short (one paragraph) biographies of participants
- A press release, which should state your group's position on the issue
- Related news stories from prestigious national publications (e.g. The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, etc.).

STEP 8: Prepare the room

Here are a few tips for getting the room set up where you'll be holding the press conference:

- Check the location of electrical outlets for microphones and lights
- Set up the room with a table long enough to seat all your spokespeople
- Provide enough seating in the room for reporters, and enough room for their supporting equipment (e.g. cameras, microphone)
- Display visuals as a backdrop to your speaker's table: charts, posters, or banners
- Provide a podium for the moderator, if possible

At the press conference

Things you can do for a smooth press conference:

- Welcome members of the press as they arrive and hand out press kit
- Provide a sign-up sheet for reporters
- Start approximately on time - no later than 5 minutes after the scheduled time
- Record the event, for your own records, and for possible media use
- Have the moderator welcome the press, and introduce the issue and participants
- Each participant should present for no more than 4 minutes, making his/her 3-5 key points
- After all the presentations, the moderator should entertain any questions from the press, and direct questions to the appropriate participants
- Thank the participants for presenting, and the media for attending. In many cases, you may want to encourage the media to stay for further informal conversation with the participants.

After the press conference

By looking through your attendance register, you should be able to determine which major media was not represented. Not everyone may arrive, as your conference may be preempted by a breaking news story elsewhere. You may want to hand deliver a press release and press packet to these people, send a tape feed, or try to schedule an interview with a reporter and one of the press conference participants.

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