

Section 8

Media Relations

“Building relationships with reporters and editors puts you a step ahead when it comes time to communicate your story. In some instances, you can bank on these relationships to get coverage of a story that might not otherwise gain media attention.”¹

— W.K. Kellogg Foundation

8.1 Benefits of media coverage

Gaining editorial or “earned” media coverage (as opposed to paid advertising) for your planning issues, planning department, and chapter or division of the American Planning Association is one of the most effective ways to reach your key audiences. Through newspapers, radio, and television you can influence elected officials, shape public perceptions, move targeted audiences to action, and raise the profile of your office and the planning profession. Most major newspapers, radio, and television news programs and established online news sites provide serious and trusted story-telling environments that underscore the significance of your issues and the credibility of your expertise and points of view.



Ned Ahrens

King County, Washington, Executive Ron Sims speaking at a media event held at the site of a new access road on the Sammamish plateau east of Seattle.

8.1.1

Media coverage doesn't just happen. It takes time and involves building relationships with members of media organizations

Media coverage doesn't just happen. It's necessary to invest time getting to know reporters, editors, editorial board members, and others from your local newspapers and broadcast stations. Also, don't wait to talk to reporters until you have something to tell. You should continually work to build relationships with members of the media. This will help when situations or developments arise that require rapid response to complete a story or set the record straight.

8.2 How it works: “breaking through”

Before you can obtain media coverage, you have to determine who is going to serve as the spokesperson for your department, firm, or organization and how you are going to “break through” in order to achieve newspaper coverage or radio and tele-



California Chapter of APA

California Chapter of APA Executive Director Sande George, left, being interviewed by National Public Radio reporter Mike Montgomery, right, at a chapter-sponsored legislative briefing in 2004. Collette Morse, past chapter president, is in the center.

vision air time. How you do this depends on who is designated as the primary spokesperson.

If you have the authority to talk to the media, you should work to convey messages, background information (including facts, figures, examples, anecdotes, and stories), context, and perspective to the press.

If another individual, such as your mayor, planning commission chair, a department superior or colleague, or an outside consultant, has been designated official spokesperson on a topic or action, your path to coverage will be indirect. You will face the added challenge of working with an intermediary to ensure that he or she understands and values your planner's perspective, wants to convey it, and has the tools to get the job done.

If you find yourself in this situation, you will benefit greatly if you have already built a relationship with the designated spokesperson. However, if you have not yet forged a connection, you can make headway in the short term by providing quality background information and talking points on the issue at hand, and making yourself available for support as needed.

Regardless of the situation you face, it's helpful to be media savvy. You should understand how the media work and the differences in the way newspapers, radio, and television reporters handle stories.

Radio is known as a mind's eye medium or as "theater for the mind." Sound bites, or quotes, should be about 25 words and take no more than 10 to 15 seconds to convey. For television, visuals and pictures are most important. Your appearance is especially important if you or your spokesperson is being interviewed on camera or appearing on a talk show. Clothing should contribute to your professional image. Maintain eye contact with those you are addressing, stay calm and composed, and avoid distracting gestures.

Media relations often involve many contributors, whether other department employees, government staff, community leaders, or those in influential positions. During the past several years, the planning department in Buffalo, New York, recipient of an APA 2005 National Planning Award, has demonstrated deft management of an outreach network that gets planning extensive coverage by the local press:

Mayor Tony Masiello is the primary spokesman for planning in the city, although his office relies on the advice and technical expertise of planners to hone his message. When working with media representatives on a story

8.2.1

It's important to be 'media savvy' and understand the differences between print and broadcast media outlets.

or development, several city employees may be involved including representatives from the Office of Strategic Planning, the Planning Department, the Mayor's Office, and the city's Office of Public Information. Together, they ensure a steady stream of planning-related story ideas and developments reaches media outlets.

Breaking through to the media in Buffalo did not involve developing a superstar planner or sponsoring a one-time media event. Rather, it entailed a strategic, long-term initiative designed to demonstrate how effective planning could help reverse the city's long and steady decline. Buffalo added "beef" to this initiative by adopting a new city charter in 1996, which led to the creation of the Office of Strategic Management and the appointment of a commissioner-level planning chief who would be responsible for directing the visioning and implementation of a new, vibrant economic and cultural core for downtown Buffalo.²



Buffalo Office of the Mayor

While in office, former Buffalo, New York, Mayor Tony Masiello was the primary spokesperson for planning.

8.3 Preliminary steps

Getting your media outreach efforts off on the right foot requires planners to:

Be pro-active. Whether you are speaking directly to the media, or providing support from behind the scenes, you do not have to wait until you have "major news" or receive a call from a reporter. Reporters are not only interested in breaking news. Most are continually looking for good feature stories, "evergreen" issue-focused pieces or new angles on familiar topics.

If you want to get to know a reporter or encourage him or her to cover a topic you think is important, try scheduling a background briefing. You can contact the reporter via phone or e-mail. Begin the conversation by introducing yourself, your expertise, and your desire to have a background discussion with the reporter. You are more likely to be successful if you convey to the reporter that you are involved in the issues he or she covers and can serve as a valuable source.

Before reaching out, familiarize yourself with the reporter's work by reviewing bylined articles or transcripts of broadcast stories he or she has produced. (You can find this type of information through Google or another search engine, on media outlets web sites, or through publication databases, such as Nexis.)

You will have a significant advantage if you stay abreast of how the media is covering planning and planning-related stories in your community and nationally. Such knowledge will help you frame or position your initial pitch, and, once you have secured an interview, tailor your remarks during the discussion. If you know what is being written, you can offer the reporter a planner's perspective on a story.

8.3.1

Planners provide the media with a unique perspective

8.3.2
Maintain a list of reporters covering planning-related issues

Know who covers planning issues. You will greatly increase your chances of success in securing coverage if you begin your outreach effort by developing and regularly updating a list of reporters, editors, and broadcast news directors who cover planning issues.

Get started by identifying and studying the media outlets in your area. Read local newspapers and listen to TV, radio news, and public affairs programs to identify reporters who cover issues related to planning in your community. Familiarize yourself with their work. You should know who covers local zoning board meetings or hearings. You can find names of newspaper, TV, and radio reporters in your area on media outlet websites. Another good way to find this information is to ask your contacts at the local government press office.

Use this information to develop a detailed target list that includes each reporter's name, outlet, and contact information including telephone and fax numbers and e-mail address.

You should also note the audiences that the media outlets aim to reach. The audience targeted by a trade publication dealing with planning issues will be very different from the audience reached by a homeowner's association newsletter. While both are of potential value to you, you will want to know who comprise the outlets' end audiences so you can adapt your messages accordingly when speaking with reporters.

Reporters change jobs frequently, both within and between organizations. When reading your local newspaper or reviewing trade journals, note who is writing about issues of relevance to your office and who is no longer there.

8.3.3
Long-term relationships with the media pay dividends

Make the connection. Once you have identified who is covering planning issues, work to develop a rapport with key reporters, editors, and producers. You can start by sending an introductory letter or making a phone call to introduce yourself. As previously mentioned, you can make an overture by scheduling a background briefing regarding a planning-related issue or the role of planners. You can then continue to nurture the relationship by providing story ideas, offering to serve as a resource without always being quoted, or just touching base regularly. And if you do have breaking news, by all means call your contacts.

Members of the media are often working against tight deadlines, so you may not always get a warm reception when you call. After introducing yourself, ask if they have a minute to talk. If not, ask when it would be a good time for you to call back. It's best to call newspaper reporters in the morning or early afternoon, well before their late afternoon or early evening deadlines. Reporters respect persistence. Keep in mind that they need you as much as you need them: With no stories to cover, they would have silent broadcasts and blank pages!

Making the connection with a newspaper or other media outlet may involve years of relationship building. The benefit of developing such a relationship is longevity. New reporters covering planning issues will be more favorably disposed to your department

if you had a good working relationship with their predecessors. Consider this example from Columbus, Ohio:

The Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC) invested considerable effort over several years to change opinions at the Columbus Dispatch's editorial board. They suggested meetings with leaders of organizations who supported and were advocates of the Planning Commission's position on important issues. At the same time, the organization's director of government relations cultivated a relationship with Brian Williams, the transportation issues reporter.

The effort showed few results at first, even as MORPC provided a steady stream of well timed and delivered information. Eventually, however, Brian Williams "finally started asking the right questions." During the late 1990s stories published by the Dispatch showed an increased willingness to cover, in detail, planning-related issues. Editorials signaled support for controversial positions backed by MORPC, such as tax-base sharing and collaborative economic planning.³

Establish credibility and reliability. Do your homework! Take the time to master the information reporters, editors, and producers seek and to make sure you are attuned to presenting the valuable local perspective. This means keeping up with pertinent facts and figures, and being able to convey your messages in succinct and compelling sound bites. If you are asked a question that you do not know the answer to, tell the reporter you'll find out and get back to him or her. It is important to make sure you follow-up if you promise to do so.

Given planners' unique role in a community, they have a comprehensive perspective on many of the causes, contributing factors, and on-going developments that affect and shape a community. Planners can provide observations, insights, and understanding on development-related issues that are particularly valuable and interesting to media audiences. These insights and observations are among a planner's stock-in-trade when it comes to talking to newspaper reporters, editors, and radio and television broadcasters. Make sure you trade on them!

8.4 Basic tools

In order to stand out from other organizations and individuals competing for the media's attention, you will need to create a hook for the story you'll cast, then pull together materials and develop talking points that will help you sell your story. Compelling and complete story elements will increase the chances that the media will cover your issue. The following tools can help you capture their attention.

8.3.4

Planners' insights are useful as background and for news analysis



Dubuque City Manager's Office

Theresa Caldwell, president of the Washington Neighborhood Association in Dubuque, Iowa, speaking to members of the press and others at the launch of a local revitalization initiative.

8.4.1
Keep media advisories to one page

Media advisories and availability notices. An advisory alerts the media to an event. An availability notice alerts the media to the availability of an expert to speak to a particular timely topic. This might include the achievement of a planning milestone or an expert's perspective on an ongoing debate, such as affordable housing supply.

An advisory should be short and simple. Keep it to one page. You should include a catchy lead sentence or paragraph detailing why the event or topic is important and also information to establish the knowledge and credibility of your spokesperson. For television stations, be sure to include information about anticipated visuals. If you are publicizing a meeting, distribute the advisory one week before the scheduled event.

8.4.2
To be effective, press releases must have news value

Press releases. Effective press releases get attention. When crafted well, they are interesting to read, engage a reporter or editor's curiosity, and provide all of the essential pieces of information a journalist needs for following up and developing the story. Press releases that lack news value, timeliness, relevance to current trends, or human interest go into the recycling bin.

What makes for news, to a certain degree, is subjective. "News is whatever the editor thinks is news," is the way some public relations practitioners put it. Good questions to consider when writing a release include: What is new, significant, unusual, or different here? Why should the news media be interested? How is this going to affect the lives of the media outlet's audience? What's the new story that we are telling or, if the story is not new, what are the new developments and why do they merit additional media coverage at this time?

Reading the local newspaper is a good way to see what the reporters and editors in your community view as news.

A good press release begins with a powerful lead that contains important details: who, what, why (the reporter should be interested), where, and when. It also typically features a quote from a spokesperson in a subsequent paragraph. Make sure you stick to the facts in the lead, and know that the quote gives you some opportunity for editorializing. A press release should be brief (not more than two pages) and, especially for local media outlets, include a local angle. Always include the name, e-mail address, and phone number of a media contact that can answer questions (whether this is you or a public affairs or press contact in the city office). You also may want to include standard information about your agency,



Somerset County, New Jersey

Photo opportunities with elected representatives and others are a way to publicize planning. Here local officials from Somerset County, New Jersey, are pictured with U.S. Representatives Rodney Frelinghuysen and Michael Ferguson (to the left), who secured \$3 million in federal funds for a county transportation corridor plan and project.

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organization, or department so that reporters will become familiar with your office and your work.

Pitch calls. After distributing the press advisory, availability notice, or press release, make follow-up calls to your media contacts. Your pro-active outreach, in the form of a pitch call, can make the difference between securing coverage and an interview, or not. Even if the reporter declines, the pitch call provides you with an excellent opportunity to solicit feedback on what reporters are looking for and can go a long way toward helping you build a relationship with a reporter.

8.4.3

Follow up your press releases with a telephone call

8.5 Editorial boards

“For much of the public, newspaper editorials may be the only window to responding to an issue. As such, they are a powerful tool in forming public opinion. In turn, that public opinion can be crucial in forming policy.”⁴
— Illinois State Rep. John Fritchey

Before approaching an editorial board, ask yourself what it is you want to accomplish. Knowing your goal and the reasons you want to meet with the editorial board will ensure that the time is well spent and that you will remain focused on the topic or issue you came to discuss.

When preparing to meet with an editorial board, start by thoroughly reviewing the editorials that your targeted newspaper has published in the past — especially those that relate to your issue or revolve around similar topics. Because editorials do not have a byline, identifying the appropriate contact can be challenging. You can start by reaching out to the editorial page assistant and asking who typically writes on planning issues. Sometimes, especially at smaller newspapers, staff columnists also serve on the editorial board, so reviewing columns might help you identify the editorial writers who cover your issue.

Most editorial boards are made up of a core team. In some cases, however, reporters from other sections of the paper are invited to attend the meetings, especially if they are currently covering related topics. Other newspapers may have a community editorial board made up of volunteer residents. Once you secure a meeting, find out who will attend so you can send them background material in advance and tailor your talking points accordingly.

When you make a pitch, via phone or e-mail, be sure to explain how the issue you want to discuss directly impacts the paper’s readers. Be concise and try to tie your pitch to topics that are currently being covered by the publication.

Above all, you must come to an editorial meeting with a point of view. Editorial boards are not for pitching stories, but for advocating a stance. Be prepared to present a strong, focused case and stick to your topic. Do not raise multiple issues. Keep your group of experts to no more than four and remember that *all* editorial meetings are “on the record.”

Sometimes a newspaper editorial board will convene a group of experts and conduct a round-table discussion on a selected topic. *The Tampa Tribune* in Tampa, Florida, did this when it invited 10 people, including Ramond Chiamonte, AICP, assistant executive director of the Hillsborough County-City Planning Commission, to discuss the revitalization challenges facing downtown Tampa.

California APA Chapter's 2005 Legislative Agenda

To draw public attention to its smart growth legislative program and accompanying message, "Growth with Heart," the California Chapter of the American Planning Association (CCAPA) invited print, broadcast, and wire service reporters to a news conference February 11, 2005, in Sacramento.

A press kit (http://www.calapa.org/attachments/contentmanagers/170/Press-kit_CCAPA2005legAgenda.pdf) was distributed at the media event, where chapter leaders discussed the organization's policy goals and agenda for the state, Plan California 2005. A news release summarized prepared remarks by chapter president Jeri Weiss Ram, AICP, and identified the two essentials—planning for affordable housing and smart growth—necessary to accommodate the state's expected population growth during the next decade. The kit also included the chapter's legislative agenda and an executive summary.

Several journalists attended the event and Sacramento television station KCRA, Channel 3, aired a piece that evening, including a sound bite from Ram (<http://www.calapa.org/en/cms/?175>). The following Monday, February 14, the Chico Enterprise Record ran an article on the chapter's legislative goals quoting both Ram and chapter legislative director Vince Bertoni, AICP.

Ram followed up the press conference with an opposite-the-editorial page (op-ed) opinion piece reiterating the message that smart growth principles should drive new home development and that housing options should be expanded through infill zoning. The Ventura County Star ran the piece on Sunday, April 24, 2005.

The redesign of its website in May 2005 presented CCAPA with another opportunity to repeat its message that the chapter is an information resource on legislative and other issues pertaining to planning and smart growth. A news release about the new website—"designed to be a resource for California's planning community and others interested in California planning policy and legislation"—was distributed June 2, 2005, through Business Wire and included quotes from Ram.



Chiaromonte spoke vividly about the opportunity before the city to fill in empty spaces downtown. “Downtown looks great from the air,” he said, “but is devoid of activity on the ground once people who work there go home in the evening.”⁵

8.6 Interview basics

The most effective way to work with the media is to think like they do and to be prepared. Remember, reporters want what you have to offer! They need access to experts and information that support stories with reader and viewer appeal. You (and your spokespeople) provide that information and expertise.

To help ensure that you, your office, and your comments are represented accurately, consider the following tips when responding to media requests and preparing for media interviews:

Handling inquiries

When a reporter calls to request an interview don't panic. Instead, maintain your cool and write down the reporter's name, position, publication or station, and telephone number. Ask about his or her deadline and the interview format. Politely ask for background on the story and any specific questions he or she wants to ask.



North Carolina Chapter of APA

A Raleigh television station interviews North Carolina Chapter of APA President Bill Duston, AICP. The chapter held a press conference in April 2004 to release a report about billboards published with assistance from APA.

Next, tell the reporter that you need to finish what you are doing, and would like to call back in a few minutes, hours, or days. This will depend on the reporter's deadline and on your needs. If you are being asked to commit to a live or taped interview on a subsequent date, this time will allow you to consider the opportunity, check your availability, and formulate a response. If the reporter is seeking immediate comment over the phone, you can still take some time to pull together your response, including talking points and supporting facts or information. Before you talk to the reporter, make sure you:

- Know the media format. A print and Internet reporter may take more time to conduct the interview, but you will still want to provide quotable information. Radio and television reporters are looking for soundbites that fit succinctly into their reports. Keep this in mind as you provide your remarks.
- Develop talking points that succinctly and clearly convey the most important information you want to see in print or broadcast.
- Organize background information about the issue and conduct additional research if necessary. If you have in-house fact sheets on a issue, consider sharing them with the reporter if appropriate.
- Practice your delivery before the interview. As they say practice makes perfect.

8.6.1

Before calling back a reporter, prepare a response; if you are too busy to talk, say so

8.6.2

Maintain control of the interview; assume everything is on the record

During the interview

- **Establish ground rules.** Don't hesitate to speak to the reporter ahead of time about the duration of the interview and the topics you will or will not address.
- **Identify yourself.** Give your full title and provide biographical information as appropriate.
- **Stick to the point.** During the interview stay focused, use short and concise sentences, and use everyday language. Formulate each response to make your point upfront, followed by supporting points and explanations.
- **Be clear.** Avoid acronyms and jargon. Imagine that you are speaking to a neighbor or relative who is not involved in planning.
- **Use analogies and anecdotes.** Good analogies can simplify complex subjects and make a topic more interesting.
- **Avoid saying anything "off the record."** It is better not to tell a reporter anything you do not want to see in print or on television. Remember, off-the-record isn't retroactive. You can't tell a reporter something and then take it back.
- **Use humor carefully.** A facetious remark often seems sarcastic on the air or printed page.
- **Maximize non-verbal communication.** What you wear, your body language, and your gesticulations should support your message and build your credibility as an expert.
- **Take control.** Always remember, you don't have to answer the questions they ask! Understand and utilize bridging phrases to transition from the question that was asked to the message point you want to make. Bridging phrases include:
 - I might frame that question differently...
 - If what you are asking is...
 - Let me put that in context...
 - You make a good point. However...
 - What is really important to remember is...
 - What I can speak to is...
- **Offer to check facts.** Always offer to review factual information and quotes for accuracy. If the reporter declines to let you review copy for a printed article and you are concerned about being misquoted, ask the reporter what he or she intends to quote from your interview.
- **Provide informational materials.** Never send a reporter away empty-handed.

Provide news releases, journal articles, a biographical sketch, or a summary of your main points.

Interview follow-up

- **Confirm placement date.** Ask a reporter when the story will air or be published.
- **Recognize a job well done.** If the story is good, write a note to that effect to the reporter. This can help build a positive relationship.
- **Address mistakes.** If the reporter gets it wrong, you can consider calling the reporter to correct a misunderstanding or mistake.

8.6.3

Steps to take after an interview

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