

Living Streets Aotearoa



www.livingstreets.org.nz

MEDIA RESOURCE KIT

This Media Resource Kit is a tool to help Living Streets members and advocates get their message out to people through the media. It is an evolving resource, which we want to be as useful as possible.

We welcome feedback on the usefulness of the kit based on your experiences, together with any suggestions for improving the resource.

The Media Resource Kit is available on the Living Streets website www.livingstreets.org.nz or from the address below. Please send your feedback to:

Living Streets Aotearoa

Liz Thomas
Executive Director
PO Box 25 424
Wellington 6146
liz.thomas@livingstreets.org.nz

MEDIA RESOURCE KIT

This document is intended to be a general guide for walking advocates to help them in dealing with the media. It covers some general points about key messages, interviews, potential problem areas, approaches by and to the media, and suggests a simple media policy that all Walking User Groups should have in place.

1. What the media want

- The media are hungry, especially TV and radio with their frequent news broadcasts: they want to be first with the story, and need something fresh and different.
- You'll often have to deal with young, inexperienced journalists due to high staff turnover (regional media is often viewed as a training ground).
- A dedicated transport reporter won't always exist, or be available. Journalists are rarely specialists and won't necessarily know the way into a story (they tend to use a standard approach). You can suggest the way in.
- Develop a relationship with your local media so they know who you are and vice versa. If you've built up trust and earned their respect, they are more likely to treat you fairly.
- Keep in touch with a reporter so they see you as a resource person. Keep doing your homework and follow the stories. Give them an idea of new work or future plans.
- The media maintain contacts lists that include ratings. Aim to be someone who's helpful, easy to deal with, and presentable. Don't get annoyed with them if they don't cover you.
- With radio, morning is a good time to approach journalists. Sunday is excellent (they need stories for Monday).
- For TV late morning/early afternoon is best. Avoid TV and radio on late Friday afternoon. TV don't film for the next day - it's either that day, or the opportunity is gone.
- TV news teams meet in the morning to decide which existing stories to cover; other stories might come up at short notice or a story might take longer, in which case the TV crew don't turn up.
- Recognise the inherent risks and seductive opportunities involved in encouraging media interest.

2. Stories and key messages

- Unless the situation is exceptional it's best to write down what you want to say, whether it is a media release (containing news), a statement (a response to a previous or current event), an advisory (advertising an event your group is involved in), or notes to yourself for a radio or telephone interview. Focus on the specific angle you can bring to the topic. Keep asking yourself: "What is special about the message I have to give?"
- Start by writing down what the issue is. It's useful to brainstorm angles for a story.
- Focus on people, e.g. what impact a project will have on pedestrians, ratepayers, or residents.
- If you found others are interested in a story, the media probably will be too. Consider: "will it be the sort of thing people will discuss around the coffee machine at work?"
- People are fundamentally self-interested. The audience will think "how does this relate to ME?" It's not enough to say people should be interested.
- Emotion is important: a story should not just engage the brain, but engage the audience with something personal, or perhaps humorous.

- Use strong language to gain attention, e.g. “walkers are jubilant / delighted / outraged / angry at ...”
- It's essential to ruthlessly prune your information down to ensure your one key message is highlighted: other information is likely to be a distraction - if you need to include extra information, get to it after the key message has been put.
- Media can get tired of whingeing; if you have some positive angle, example or anecdote then use it.
- Some stories will run regularly (e.g. the mid-winter swim...).
- Don't assume that a secondary or later phase of a project is boring. Wait until you have good results to show. Find other similar initiatives to put together in a bigger story.

3. Contacting the media with your story

- All media want to be first. You might want to time your event or release based on who you think will cover it or who you want to cover it.
- Notice who the reporters are and come to them with stories ("I liked your item last night. I think you might be interested in...").
- If you have initiated personal contact with a journalist to give them a story, they will assume the story is their 'exclusive'. This is a good way of building relationships. Don't break that trust by releasing the story to others. If it's a good enough story the news services may pick it up and make it generally available.
- The danger of focusing on just one media outlet is that they might not cover your story. It may be preferable to make your story widely available up front via a media release (see below).
- TV stories need great pictures. It's only worth approaching TV if you have something for people to see - don't leave it for them to come up with the ideas.
- Look for powerful images (e.g. Nurses Organisation gets oldest nurse alive to lick stamps for Fair Pay campaign envelopes).
- Celebrities make great photo opportunities or TV viewing. Politicians often don't. Build up a list of celebrities who will co-operate.
- In the regions, don't think "TV won't cover us"; TV will come if it's a great story (they want to show they have nationwide coverage).

4. Media releases

- A media release should be one page or less describing the central issue, your organisation's involvement, and what you want to happen. Other messages and supporting information can be attached in a separate document or sent as a follow up.
- The angle needs to be explained in the first or second sentence, e.g. following something quirky (attention grabbing). This may be all that is used. Cover the five W's (who, what, why, when, where) as well as 'how'. For follow-up stories, start with the new angle then explain the basics.
- Quotes you give need to be strong and direct, and build on the story in some way. It's best to have people say things in their own words.
- Find common ground with the audience. Make things concrete and real; it's no good being amorphous; reduce things down to the bare essentials or break up complex issues into chunks and deal with them one at a time.
- Maintain a contacts list for the various newspapers, magazines, TV and radio stations in your area.
- Send the release via e-mail.

- Try to address media releases to specific reporters; include relevant parts of the same organisation, e.g. Morning Report, Checkpoint, news.
- Give contact details of someone who is authorised to speak on behalf of your group and who will be available. Make sure that person is available on the number provided. If the media can not get hold of that person, they will stop trying. If they have to leave a message, get back to them as soon as possible. They are busy people and work to deadlines. They are generally doing you more of a favour than you are doing them!
- Always follow up an e-mail or fax with a phone call; it's an opportunity to 'sell' the story; "Did you get the fax from me? We've got this really exciting thing happening..."
- As an alternative to a media release, send supporting information, ring and talk to the journalist and give names of other people to call.
- See <http://www.livingstreets.org.nz/press.htm> for examples of Living Streets media releases.

5. Being approached by the media

- It's generally best to see being approached by the media as an opportunity: even a negative approach can be turned around to your advantage.
- If you want to stop a story from continuing to run it can often work well to refuse to comment, though this isn't foolproof.
- Speed of response is essential. Be aware of the journalist's deadlines. If you have to call back, find out their deadline and ring back at the agreed time. If you can't get through to the journalist's direct line, call the news desk.
- Get the reporter's name and find out who they are doing the story for (what organisation? which programme or section of the paper?).
- Clarify that the conversation is not being recorded.
- Try to understand the context (where has this come from...?) and the angle of the story.
- Ask who else they've spoken to.
- If the reporter refers to other documents ask to see a copy.
- If the media calls unexpectedly ("cold calling") and asks for comment on something- DON'T respond "then and there", and "TALK OFF THE CUFF" You might say something that will come back to bite you. This is high risk territory for mistakes. You need to prepare, so buy time. Offer to ring back (if possible in a few minutes) or arrange for them to ring back, end the call, then marshal your thoughts, write them down, and ring (and/or email or fax) the media back as agreed.
- Ring back even if you don't have the information they're after. Suggest who else they could contact. You can point the media to opponents with a rational approach.
- Do not say "This is off the record", and avoid throw-away comments.
- Stick to the facts.
- Don't answer the phone while driving, cycling, or walking across roads!
- If you get out of your depth, get help from an experienced spokesperson.

6. How to deal with the interview

- Before an interview make sure you have your key message sorted out. Write it down.
- Practise saying your key message out loud.
- You can guide the interviewer to your key message by using a phrase like "The important thing here is ..."
- If the interview relates to a report or speech you are going to make, have copies to hand.

- Think "who will they go to for the opposing view and what will that person say?", then prepare to counter their views.
- The approach you need is similar to how you'd go about talking to someone who knows nothing about the subject. Make it short, personal, with no big words (aim it at a 10 year old child). Use the active (not passive) voice (e.g. "we think that..." rather than "it's thought that...").
- Don't be afraid to use a personal touch in a story where appropriate (real emotion): it helps to show you're a real person, with real concerns.
- Go for the maximum gutsiness within the bounds of honesty and the constraints of your mandate.
- Try to appear in a light that confounds the negative images of you that others may want to depict.
- Turn your cellphone off before the interview.
- Once you're in the studio, be 'on duty' - treat the microphone as always live. For radio interviews by phone ask the journalist to tell you when they start taping.
- If the story is for the news, keep working in the key message(s) to maximise the chance it will get used.
- Avoid waffle and opportunities for reporters to piece together a response out of context.
- If the interview is pre-recorded you can have another go: "I'm sorry, can you throw that question at me again"; important to avoid starting up again mid-sentence (they won't be able to use that bit). It's fine to say "Sorry, I've lost my train of thought, I'll start that again."
- To get back on topic, use a bridging phrase ("Look, I think the really important point is...").
- Avoid saying "as I said" or "as you mentioned before", because the 'before' might not get broadcast.
- Don't be trapped into repeating 'bait phrases' (e.g. "Wairarapa's such a violent place") in your answer (especially as the original phrase may get left out, and it seems like your own statement).
- Stop when you've said what you need to; don't run on; don't be panicked by the interviewer waiting for you - **make them responsible for the silence.**

7. Television

- It's useful if you have actions that can be rehearsed or done repeatedly.
- TV reporters will often do the background work. They look to you to provide the personal touch (a personal story that illustrates a general point).
- Have things well organised in advance - TV people are usually under time pressures. Make their jobs easier by arranging to film in an accessible area.
- Avoid bland spaces - if necessary, put up posters on the wall or on a board.
- Arrange for 'real people' to be interviewed (e.g. people who've been affected); sort this out in advance if possible so you're prepared for an approach by the media.
- What is appropriate clothing for your job or position? You need to look tidy/casual, not too formal. Look at people on TV for tips (do I want to look like that?).
- Consider setting up some practical activity to do while you're being filmed (it may help you to keep calm), but avoid fiddling.
- Facial expressions show a lot. Don't relax at the end of the interview. Retain your composure until you're absolutely sure it's over.
- If seated get bum at back of seat, feet flat on floor. Don't swivel. Sit slightly forward, don't slump or lean.

8. Follow-up

- It can be difficult to check on what's been written by a journalist before it is published. One option is to make it seem like you're doing them a favour - "I know there are some complex issues here. Maybe you'd like me to check it through..."
- If a minor inaccuracy occurs but the general message of the story is correct then it's sometimes better to leave it as it is.
- If a major mistake is made phone the media outlet's news desk and discuss the release of a small correction item. For print media you may be advised to write a letter to the editor with a copy going to the journalist. Your letter may be published and, in some cases the paper or magazine may print a retraction. However, this will ensure the debate stays in the public eye, which you may wish to avoid.
- Note who writes good stories or who picks up on your issues and collect their names. Give praise for the way they handled stories in general, but don't thank them for their coverage of your issue - compliments are appropriate, thanks are not.
- A media release etc. which is repeated word for word, prominently, in the media which you have targeted is a bullseye hit!

9. Media policies

- Every organisation should have a media policy. It can be as simple as:
 - designating one person to talk to the media
 - insisting the designated media spokesperson consults with others if she/he is unsure about group policy
 - ensuring all members know who that person is and know to refer all media enquiries to that person in all cases
- Living Streets media policy is under development.

For help or for further information, contact:

Living Streets Aotearoa www.livingstreets.org.nz

Liz Thomas
Executive Director
04 485 8280
021 106 4201

Liz.thomas@livingstreets.org.nz

Celia Wade-Brown
President
04 938 6691
027 4836 691

celia.wadebrown@livingstreets.org.nz

Acknowledgments

Base document developed by Robert Ibell (Chairperson, The Cycling Advocates' Network) from notes taken at "Making the Most of the Media" Workshop, October 2004. Contact details and small additions updated the resource kit in June 2008.