

Working with the Media

Media play a huge role in our society by helping shape public opinion. Getting media coverage can be a huge asset to educating members of the community, raising awareness, and garnering support for programs or initiatives you are working on. A few things you will want to keep in mind when working with members of the media:

- Always read or watch their coverage before reaching out to them. It is important to know what type of stories they tend to cover and it will help you to get a sense of their reporting style.
- Reporters are busy and media resources are dwindling these days. Reporters rely more and more on public relations professionals to give them a complete story with up-to-date facts and statistics that they will not need to double-check.
- Email is your best first approach unless you have a great working relationship with a particular reporter and feel comfortable picking up the phone to call directly.

What Are Media Relations?

Media relations are more than getting an interview or story in your local newspaper or on your TV, radio, or cable station. Media relations are about external communication to the masses to increase awareness of PTA or PTA's activities. There are two main aspects to media relations: knowing what is news worthy about what you're doing and building and leveraging the relationships within media.

Identifying Newsworthy Items among Your Activities

Consider asking yourself these questions to identify whether your activities are news worthy:

1. Is there timeliness to what you're doing?
2. Is there something prominent in your activity or event?
3. Are you making a statement on a current hot issue or topic?
4. Are you calling for action on a local issue?
5. Is there a significant human element to your cause?

If you answered yes to at least three of these questions, you may have a story that is news worthy. For example, a general meeting may be listed in the community calendar section or on a community bulletin board, but it will not be considered news.

However, if your PTA is addressing an issue of vital interest to the community, such as education funding or curriculum changes, a media outlet may send a reporter or ask for an interview.

Look for Photo Opportunities

If you are hosting an event, ask your local newspaper to send a photographer or send photographs to your local paper immediately after the event. Include captions that describe what is happening in the photo and identify participants. Be sure your photos show action and activity instead of people simply smiling and shaking hands. Always remember to obtain a photo release form for any pictures you plan to share with the media. You can find one on the PTA's website, at <http://www.ptakit.org/Communications/Photography-and-Videography/Release-Forms.aspx>.

Building and Leveraging Media Relationships

Finding the right reporters is critical to getting started with building a contact list. The best way to build a list of local reporters is to first read and watch the news outlets in your market. This will help you identify which reporters are covering specific topics. For example, is there a local news reporter that you have seen cover news of school or education programs? Note his/her name and do a quick scan of the outlet's website for a phone number or email. This might take a bit of digging and time in the beginning, but you will find that building a targeted media list will be well worth the investment. When you do reach out to a reporter, offer yourself as a contact on education and family articles, and find out if it's ok for you to send them information on what you're doing as a PTA leader.

Maintaining good relationships with these reporters will be what helps you place your story. Try to be selective about what you are taking to each reporter. Make sure you are being strategic – there is a fine line between staying on the radar and bombarding contacts with too many non-newsy updates. Reporters appreciate resources – and that means you!

Only pitch stories to them that you know they would have interest in covering. And if they do not cover your story, thank them anyway. Or perhaps point them to another resource where they can get the information they are looking for. They will remember that you helped them and that will make the difference for next time. Similar to building relationships with members of Congress, you need to continue to nourish the relationship even when there isn't news to share.

To Cultivate Relationships with Members of the Media:

- Invite reporters to coffee or lunch for a background briefing on important PTA issues.
- Welcome reporters to PTA meetings or programs.
- Create an e-mail list of reporters and send monthly or bimonthly items of note.

In the end, they are looking for a resource; someone they can count on, who is reliable, credible, can respond quickly and is trust worthy. Once you have exhibited these traits, the media will trust you and take the news you provide them about your PTA seriously.

Pitches and Press Releases

Two fundamental tools you will use to conduct media outreach with are a pitch and a press release. Both are designed to communicate your message to reporters. What is the difference and when do you use one versus the other?

A pitch is a great tool to convince a journalist your story is news-worthy and relevant to his or her audience. It can either supplement a press release or serve as a stand-alone tool. A pitch is less formal and more targeted to a specific reporter than a standard press release. Think of it as a short e-mail to a reporter outlining why your story is of interest to his/her particular beat and audience. Perhaps he/she has covered this issue in the past or could benefit from connecting with you (or another spokesperson) to gain insight, information or news? A pitch is your chance to present yourself as a valuable resource. It should provide a reporter reading it with a quick snapshot of who you are, what your news is and why it is relevant.

A press release is a written, formal statement to the media on behalf of an organization. It typically announces a range of news items, including events, awards, new products, or programs. A press release is useful when there is a milestone event, program launch or other “big” news coming from your PTA that is intended for a broad media audience. It follows a standard format, contains the appropriate contact information and allows a reporter the chance to follow up with you, should he/she be interested in pursuing a story.

All PTAs should send out press releases. How well a press release is written is almost as important as the information it contains. In general, the most important information comes first, with less important details in later paragraphs.

Components of an Effective Press Release

- Deliver key information quickly: who, what, where, when, why and how should be found near the top of the release.
- Keep it short. Use action words and simple sentences with common language.
- Report the facts, not opinions. Avoid editorializing and using adjectives such as “outstanding” or “interesting” when describing programs, events, etc.
- Don’t use titles like Mr., Mrs., Ms., or Miss. Refer to people by their full name on first reference.
- On second mention, refer to people by their last names only.
- Verify your facts. Your credibility depends on the accuracy of the information.
- Check —and then double check—spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

After sending a pitch or a press release, be sure to follow up with the appropriate reporter to ensure they received it and answer any questions they may have.

Some sample press releases are included below. You may visit the Press Center at PTA.org/About for more.

Tip:

If you bombard the media with letters and press releases about stories that aren’t news, editors may begin to ignore all communications from your PTA.

Your Toolbox

Take the time to develop a file of resources. This will help organize the many activities you will undertake. Here are some ideas for how to build this toolbox:

Get to Know PTA

Know PTA’s goals, programs, public policies, and activities on the local, state, and national levels. Familiarize yourself with National PTA resources, such as Our Children Magazine, PTA Takes Action Updates, the Public Policy Agenda, PTA Parent, and PTA.org.

Determine Who Your Spokesperson Is

Create a list of PTA leaders who can speak for the organization. Make sure that you have the names and telephone numbers of PTA officers. Keep information on your PTA and its activities close at hand.

Develop a Media List

Include reporters' and editors' names, addresses, telephone numbers, and e-mail addresses. This information can be obtained from the outlet's website or by calling them to find out the appropriate staff member to receive PTA information. Know media deadlines and the reporters who are interested in family involvement and education news. This is where your carefully crafted media list comes into play.

Communicate with PTA PR Contacts

Work closely with your state and council PR chairs. Contact them to find out how they can help you, and get on their mailing lists for PR materials, press releases, and other information.

State PR Chair

He or she can provide valuable insights on handling issues specific to your area or state. Ask about media training opportunities to be held at the state PTA convention or other state resources.

National PTA Headquarters

Contact the Communications department for help in the planning process: (800) 307-4PTA (4782).

National PTA Website

You'll find press releases, articles, information, and news on parenting, education, health, and safety issues at **PTA.org**.

Additional Media Relations Tools

In addition to a pitch and press release, there are a variety of other communication tools that can be used to bring attention to your PTA and to garner support for your programs and activities.

Op-Eds/Letters to the Editor

Op-ed pieces are written to grab the attention of various groups, including elected officials, business and community leaders and the general public. Write about your PTA's public policy positions, and submit it as a letter to the editor of your local newspaper, inviting readers to join PTA. Newspaper editors select pieces for publication based on interest to readers, originality of thought, timeliness, freshness of viewpoint, strength of the argument and the writer's expertise on the issue.

Tips for Writing a Strong Op-Ed:

- Pieces should be about 600-900 words.
- The subject of the piece should be timely and newsworthy.
- Pieces should express a single, clear point of view and be supported by facts and statistics.
- Writing should be powerful and appeal to a general audience.
- Pieces should end leaving a lasting impression and with a clear call to action.

Letters to the editor are another way to reach a large audience. Letters can take a position for or against an issue, simply inform or both. To capture readers' interest, they can include emotions and/or facts.

Tips for Writing a Strong Letter to the Editor:

- Letters should be short and concise, under 300 words in length.
- Your most important points should be stated in the first paragraph.
- Letters should be relevant and refer to a hot topic, recent event in your community or to a recent article.
- Letters should begin with "To the Editor" and should include your name, title and contact information.

Visit the website for your local newspaper for additional guidelines for writing op-ed pieces and letters to the editor as well as submission information.

Broadcast Media

- Prepare your own TV and radio spots about your PTA, if feasible. Many local high schools and colleges can help you with production.
- Ask TV and radio station program directors to identify any upcoming interviews or "talk show" themes where PTA input or participation would be appropriate.
- Submit announcements about upcoming PTA events and meetings to community bulletin boards found on local TV and radio stations, to internet bulletins, and to community websites.
- Cable TV offers opportunities for promoting local groups, programs, and services. Call your local cable company for more information on public access programming and how you can use it for your PTA. Many stations will give up to 30 minutes each month to community service groups.

Sample Press Releases from National PTA's media archive (more can be found in the Press Center at PTA.org/About):

Public Policy Sample:

National PTA Commends Bi-Partisan Family Engagement Legislation

Media Contact:

Jane Doe

Director of Strategic Communications

(555) 555-1234

sample@pta.org

ALEXANDRIA, VA (July 11, 2013)—Today, the Family Engagement in Education Act of 2013 was introduced in the House and the Senate as a means to empower parents, improve capacity for states, and provide much-needed resources for schools to improve family engagement.

Representatives Glenn Thompson (R-PA/5) and Carolyn McCarthy (D-NY/5), and Senators Jack Reed (D-RI), Chris Coons (D-DE) and Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) will introduce the much-anticipated legislation. Intended to inform comprehensive reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act/No Child Left Behind, the Family Engagement in Education Act would engage all parties with a stake in improving student achievement and school performance.

“National PTA firmly believes that family engagement is at the core of children’s success,” National PTA President Otha Thornton said. “We commend these legislators for advocating on behalf of American families and their children. This bipartisan legislation is crucial in maintaining partnerships between families, schools and the community that ensure student success.”

The Family Engagement in Education Act prioritizes family engagement by targeting federal resources—a small portion (.3 percent) of Title I administrative funds— for state capacity building and the establishment of at least one Local Family Engagement Center to serve the highest-need areas. The legislation would also increase the investment in family engagement locally for qualifying local agencies. With the proper funding and tools, those closest to America’s schools would have the decision-making ability to systemically embed a lasting family engagement infrastructure that is research based and results driven, but flexible in its application.

“Schooling doesn’t begin and end in the classroom. Parents and other family members play a critical role in a child’s education, too,” Rep. McCarthy said. “This bill recognizes that students do better when their families are engaged in their academics and would help ensure that this important relationship is a part of public education in America.”

Research demonstrates that family engagement in a child’s education improves attendance and grades, and reduces dropout rates. In fact, for every parent or family member that moves from “no involvement” to “slightly engaged” in a school, the rise in the level of achievement is equivalent to a \$1000 increase in per-pupil spending. The value of a “highly engaged” parent to a school is even more.

“Too often parental engagement tapers off after elementary school,” Rep. Thompson said. “The Family Engagement in Education Act will provide a frame work that will encourage parents to get out of the bleachers and back into the classroom. The competitiveness of the next generation depends upon it.”

Recent surveys of teachers show that family engagement was identified as a top priority, yet also the area in which teachers feel the least supported. In addition, Title I Administrators repeatedly cite family engagement as a top barrier to effective implementation of federal funds.

“When parents are involved with their children’s education it not only improves schools but also strengthens communities. The Family Engagement in Education Act is a smart investment that will increase resources to strengthen parental involvement and ultimately improve the school community, help educate our future workforce, and strengthen our economy,” said U.S. Senator Jack Reed.

“It’s no secret that students strive harder and perform better when families are actively engaged in their education,” Sen. Coons said. “We can create a brighter future for our country’s youth by ensuring that educators, community organizations, and family members have the resources they need to work together effectively. This legislation will help more families become and remain a driving force in their children’s academic success.”

About National PTA

National PTA® comprises millions of families, students, teachers, administrators, and business and community leaders devoted to the educational success of children and the promotion of parent involvement in schools. PTA is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit association that prides itself on being a powerful voice for all children, a relevant resource for families and communities, and a strong advocate for public education. Membership in PTA is open to anyone who wants to be involved and make a difference for the education, health, and welfare of children and youth. Learn more at PTA.org.

Promotional Event Sample:

National PTA President to be Featured on NBC Nightly News

Media Contact:

John Doe

Media Relations Manager

(555) 555-1235

sample2@pta.org

ALEXANDRIA, VA (Oct. 8, 2013)—National PTA is proud to announce that President Otha Thornton will be featured on NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams on Tuesday, Oct. 8. NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams reaches more than seven million viewers across the country each week, providing reports and analysis of the day’s most newsworthy national and international events.

“We are thrilled that such a prestigious news organization as NBC Nightly News has chosen to highlight our president and the important work of National PTA,” said Eric Hargis, executive director of National PTA. “His extensive leadership experience in various PTA roles across the country and globe has brought energy to our mission of promoting children’s educational success, health and well-being through strong family and community involvement.”

Otha Thornton was installed as president of National PTA in June 2013, making history as the first African-American male chosen to head the association. Under his leadership, National PTA has established partnerships with prestigious organizations including the NFL and AARP. Since taking the helm, Thornton also has launched an awareness campaign to celebrate the achievements of diverse student populations and share resources and advocacy tools to help school communities address the unique needs of every child.

Watch the segment featuring President Thornton on NBC stations. Check local listings for the time of the broadcast. A clip of the segment also will be available at nbcnews.com.

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