

10 top tips for charities from journalists – taken from our Charity Media Monitor

The Charity Media Monitor (CMM) is a regular poll of journalists run by nfpSynergy. We survey journalists twice a year, asking which charities have impressed them, how charities can get their stories into the media, the best ways for charities to contact journalists, and much more. It's designed to help not-for-profits sharpen their media work and make better use of their limited resources.

As part of CMM, we ask for comments from journalists on how charities can improve their media work. We've gone back through all of our reports and put together these top tips from journalists for charities, taken from 5 years of research. Here's the top ten – read on for quotes from journalists illustrating each one.

- Tip no 1: Case studies, case studies, case studies**
- Tip 2: Don't just target the newsdesk – dig deeper**
- Tip 3: 'No comment' doesn't mean 'no story'**
- Tip 4: Be available, prepared and professional**
- Tip 5: Think globally, act locally – use local media**
- Tip 6: Build relationships – meet people face to face**
- Tip 7: Think carefully about your subject lines**
- Tip 8: Email your press releases – but phone with your exclusives**
- Tip 9: Know your targeted media inside out**
- Tip 10: Find out the other side of the story: media training and more**

Tip no 1: Case studies, case studies, case studies

The importance of case studies crops up time and time again in our surveys. Your story is so much more likely to be used if you provide some human interest element in the form of a case study. Investing time in getting together a bank of case studies is probably the most useful thing that charities can do to get more media coverage.

"Case studies [are] key: without them, the media cannot cover the issue. Some charities simply do not understand this which seriously stymies their air-time. In my experience, companies and commercial organisations seem to have a greater understanding of this."

I write this same plea to charities twice a year when filling out this survey: GIVE US CASE STUDIES!...I honestly believe having case studies to speak to make a story TEN TIMES more likely to get on-air."

I think charities need to appreciate that journalists, are almost always looking for the human angle. So if they are launching a campaign or tackling a particular issue it helps to have a bank of people willing to talk about their experiences and be photographed. This information should be almost immediately at hand to be able to deal with, in particular, newspapers' tight deadlines.

Tip 2: Don't just target the newsdesk – dig deeper

Instead of sending every press release to the news desk, take the time to research individual journalists who may be interested in a more in-depth look at your issue. There are journalists out there who would love you to provide them with an interesting, in-depth story, which may be worth more than 100 short news pieces.

"I am the Social Affairs correspondent for a major national, left-wing newspaper. I specialise in in-depth articles. Long, thoughtful pieces that any charity would, presumably, give their eye teeth to feature in. And yet, I am not contacted by any. NOT ONE charity has ever approached me individually with ideas."

"There must be an army of senior feature writers/editors out there, like myself, desperate for 800-1400 leader page features on a daily basis, having to fill those pages with rubbish, at times, because we don't get a bite at issue driven charitable causes. All too often I pick up the paper and see a theme week or campaign nabbed by the Newsdesk and think of what I could have done with it."

"I still think charities fail to target relevant individuals in the broadcast media. You may get a better response from that than just firing in a press release to join the thousands of others on the news desk. I'm a political reporter and I'm sure I could adapt some of the campaigns but I rarely see many of them personally."

Tip 3: 'No comment' doesn't mean 'no story'

Big charities can often be guilty of this – journalists find it extremely frustrating if an organisation presents a bland, institutional face, with unhelpful or even obstructive press officers. If you are battling with unhelpful or negative press, have a prepared statement ready, but don't forget that journalists will want to hear both sides of the story – who knows, they might even be sympathetic.

"Bland, emailed quotes from spokespeople in response to queries are still a problem. It's not professional and certainly doesn't work as a delaying tactic or smokescreen. All the journalists I work with complain about this."

"Most charities are infuriating for journalists as they simply refuse to say anything that might be construed as anything remotely controversial, and the vast majority will not comment on specific issues when approached. It makes our job a lot harder."

"When asked to provide comment on a difficult story, too many [press officers] believe that 'no comment' means 'no story' - it doesn't, it just means they don't get to tell their side. They (whether it be press officers or senior management) just don't grasp this."

Tip 4: Be available, prepared, and professional

Make it easy for journalists to get hold of you – have a staffed telephone number on your website and press releases. If possible, set up an out-of-hours media service, and always return calls promptly, or you may find that your opportunity to comment on a story has vanished. Find out deadlines from journalists when they call so you can organise your time effectively.

“I find it very frustrating when I’m writing a feature as charities often don’t call you back or provide decent quotes. I would say I have to ring eight charities to get three to four good quotes.”

“Many charities need to bear in mind ‘carpe diem’. If you miss the bus on ‘your’ day, i.e. when your issues are high on the agenda, you miss out both then and later - you become less and less of a ‘port of call’ for journalists.”

“From a journalists point of view, if you know a particular charity is likely to give a response to a story and within a deadline, you are of course going to approach them over others”

Tip 5: Think Globally, Act Locally – use local media

Don't forget to target your message to different areas that you work in, and build up your regional press contacts. A press officer in Wales isn't going to be very interested in statistics relating to Central London, for instance. Tweaking your press release for different areas makes it more likely that you'll hit several different press outlets at once.

“Charities in general need to realise that the ones that get the best coverage on a local newspaper or radio level - have good local stories or case studies. A regional case study is no good for a station or newspaper whose market is county or city rather than regional based.”

“I feel the national charities miss a lot of opportunities because they don't work hard enough to build up a database of spokespeople and examples of victims, patients, doctors, etc that can be called upon at a local or regional level.”

“Too many charities send out information on a nationwide basis. As a weekly local newspaper we really need a local angle before we would use almost all of the stuff we receive.”

Tip 6: Build relationships – meet people face to face

If a journalist knows you personally, they are much more likely to give you a call when they have a page to fill, or need a quote on an issue, even if it's on a news item prompted by another charity. Make time to get to know important contacts.

"I think it's really important to go for a coffee or maybe come to my office and meet me for 20 minutes downstairs. It really helps if you can put a face to a name."

"It's still rare to find a charity press officer who understands that journalists do not want bland, pre-prepared emailed statements but to actually get behind issues and talk to people within the charity"

Tip 7: Think carefully about your subject lines

Press releases are the bread and butter of most charity media departments, and 75% of journalists in our autumn 2008 survey said that press releases were not only the most frequent way that charities contacted them, but also the most effective.

But not all press releases are equal. We also asked journalists what was the single most important factor in dictating whether they read a press release, and the majority (64%) said it was an intriguing/topical/engaging subject line. On a busy day, your email is going to slip unread into the 'deleted items' box unless you take the time to craft your subject line carefully.

"Please can everyone think about emails. I get 100 a day and it's easy to miss one... Please pay attention to the subject line - name of charity would be good for recognition."

Tip 8: Email your press releases – but phone with your exclusives

Many journalists find it irritating to be phoned after a press release has gone out – if the release is clear, interesting, and relevant to their work, they will contact you for any more information they need. Where charities can be more proactive is in pitching new ideas to journalists – especially if you can offer them an exclusive (and you've chosen the right journalist, and researched their publication – see tips 3 and 9!)

"Phoning to chase press releases is irritating and likely to be counter-productive. As long as a press release has all the required contact info, we will call them if we need more info!"

"If a charity has a specific story which it is offering to my newspaper exclusively, of course it is helpful to be emailed and telephoned directly. If it is sending out a general release, it is helpful to receive it via email, but unhelpful to receive a phone call."

"General press releases are great, but of course we're always hunting for that exclusive story or angle, so a personal email or call is the best. That way we can get news and features that are fresh and targeted to our readers"

"Press releases are fine for information but a detailed briefing about the charity's work or discussion of story/case study (appropriate to my publication) is more likely to result in coverage."

Tip 9: Know your targeted media inside out

If you'd like to place a story in a specific publication, make sure you've done your research first. Have a look at what kind of features they currently run, think about format, style, and content, and work out how your charity's message could fit in.

"The best charity PRs are the proactive ones who pitch unique and exclusive stories and ideas that fit the publication. They basically do their homework."

"As ever, the best charities to deal with are friendly, fast, helpful and efficient, and they understand what journalists need. The very best are discriminating enough to know which stories will work for which papers."

"It's always refreshing when a PR has clearly taken the time to read the mag and find out how we tick and what we'd want. I lose count of the times we are approached with the offer of an 'exclusive chat' with a celeb - it's not relevant to our magazine and it's frustrating when you've already got piles of story ideas to plough through. PRs who think before they send ideas are great!!"

Tip 10: Find out the other side of the story: media training and more

It helps if you can find out how it works on the other side of the fence, but this doesn't always have to mean expensive media training. Contact journalists for advice on how you can meet their organisation's needs, talk to them, find out their schedule and how they work.

"Disappointed to note that so few charities can understand this approach would lead to dramatic increase of exposure - in 10 years as a journalist, no charity public relations officer has ever asked for advice / meeting on how to increase their charity's profile."

"Every charity needs to be aware of deadlines, of requirements, to have case studies. I wonder sometimes how much media training they have. Any news organisation, I am sure, would be happy to give them a tour of their offices and discuss how they work if it helped"

To find out more about nfpSynergy, call us on 0207 426 8888, or visit our website at <http://www.nfpsynergy.net>