The Complete Guide to Nonprofit Public Relations

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The Complete Guide to Nonprofit Public Relations

Does it seem like some nonprofits get all the attention?

That's because they do. In the U.S., just over 2% of nonprofits account for 90% of all revenue in the sector. Read that again: 90%!

It must be because they're big and well-resourced, right? Well, right and wrong.

According to lawyer, researcher and nonprofit leader Kathleen Kelly Janus, two-thirds of U.S. charities struggle to bring in annual funding beyond the $500,000 mark – even if they desperately need to raise more.

One of the main culprits? Poor storytelling, which leads to low engagement and low rates of new and returning donors.

There are a lot of ways to build strong storytelling into your marketing and communications efforts. But have you ever considered the power of a nonprofit public relations strategy?

PR – the practice of promoting your organization through the media – isn't just about crisis communications.

Securing media coverage can help you to:

- **Engage a broader audience**
- **Raise awareness of your cause and impact**
- **Raise more money through donations and event ticket sales**
- **Attract more volunteers and ambassadors**

Sounds great, right? It is! And it doesn't have to cost much — in money or time.

That's why we've put together this guide to help you get started or deepen your existing PR efforts.

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How PR Fits in With Your Overall Marketing Strategy

The great thing about PR is that it's both flexible and optional.

You don't have to seek media coverage for your event or project launch, and you definitely don't need to incorporate a PR angle into every major milestone in your marketing calendar.

But adding the occasional public relations strategy to your marketing and communications efforts can do wonders for amplifying your message and helping you reach new audiences.

Here are a few times throughout the year that you could incorporate PR as part of your marketing plan:

- A major event is coming up and you need to push ticket sales.
- Your organization is launching a new fundraising campaign and you need to raise awareness (and donations).
- You're facing unexpected demand and you want the public to know you need their help to raise money or recruit volunteers.
- You generally need to grow your community of donors, supporters and volunteers.
- You're launching a new project or initiative or releasing a new report that could be relevant to a broad audience.
- You want to boost the reach and success of your year-end giving campaign.

Over time, a great PR strategy – whether it's implemented just a couple of times a year or as an embedded part of your annual marketing plan – can help build your brand and drive exciting results for your organization.

Who Should Lead Your PR Efforts?

First things first: who should actually be leading your nonprofit's PR efforts?

Most nonprofits are working with limited resources, and that includes staff. While some larger nonprofits may have a dedicated PR person (or team!) leading media relations efforts, the vast majority don't have that luxury.

But fear not – it's more than possible to deliver a great PR strategy without dedicated internal resources.

Take a moment to think about your team composition. Do you have:

- Someone dedicated to marketing and/or communications?
- A coordinator who's particularly good at communicating and is interested in PR?
- A volunteer with a little communications experience who would love to lead your organization's PR efforts?

Any of these individuals could easily be tasked with helping your organization secure media coverage (especially if they follow this guide!).

Don't get us wrong: it's always great to have a skilled PR pro on your team if you have the budget.

But if you're working on a shoestring, think about who else on your team may be interested in jumping into the world of PR.

And if you do have a little budget available to you, you may want to look into hiring a PR agency or an individual PR consultant (often a more budget-friendly option). Look for an agency or consultant that specializes in nonprofit PR.

Developing Your PR Strategy

So, where should you begin?

You might already be writing a catchy press release in your head, but make sure you have a plan before putting pen to paper (…or text to word processor).

Take some time to figure out your PR goals and objectives. Do you want to:

- Raise awareness about an important initiative? If so, why?
- Educate the public about a particular issue? Again, why is this issue so important for people to know about?
- Raise more money by reaching a bigger audience?
- Broaden your network of volunteers and ambassadors?

All of these objectives can be achieved through a solid PR strategy, but you first need to be clear about your target audience, how to reach them and the impact you hope your media coverage will create.

It can help to think about it from the perspective of the classic "who, what, where, why and how." For example:

- **Who:** Who are you trying to reach? Donors? Volunteers? How old are they? Where do they live?
- **What:** What do you want your target audience to do when they hear, see or read your message? How can you convince them they should do that thing?

- ❓ **Where:** Where is the best place to reach your target audience? Are they radio listeners or are they more likely to read the newspaper? Do they get a paper subscription or are they digital readers?
- ❓ **Why:** Why should your target audience care about your cause?
- ❓ **How:** How do you want your target audience to take action after hearing or reading your message?

If you're not sure how to answer these questions, do some research.

Take a look at your organization's database to figure out who typically supports your organization – and who you want to support your organization if they're not already represented in your community.

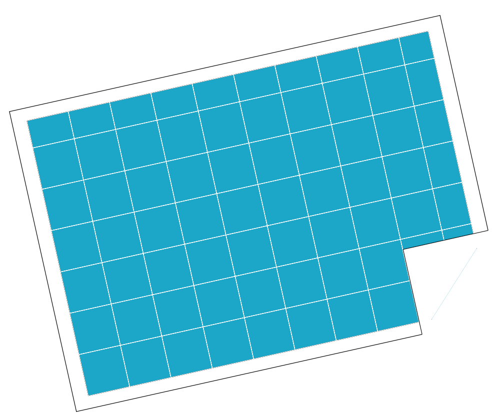
Ask your peers in the industry who may have some PR experience to share what's worked for them.

Check out a few online resources highlighting key stats about media audiences, like this one from MarketingCharts.

And don't be afraid to get in touch directly with a range of media outlets; they're usually happy to share high level details about their audience demographics. Some even have that information available on their websites.

Once you've nailed down the answers to these questions, you've basically got your strategy in hand.

Now it's time to get to the fun stuff!



02

The Basics of Pitching the Media

If you've never pitched a story to the media, the whole process can seem a bit mysterious and intimidating.

But we promise you, it's both simple and straightforward.

The most important thing to keep in mind? Journalists are always looking for great stories to tell, and nonprofits are full of great stories. It's a match made in PR heaven!

When it comes down to it, PR primarily involves:

- Identifying a great story
- Identifying your spokespeople
- Creating a solid media list
- Writing and distributing a press release to your list
- Communicating with the media and managing media opportunities

In the sections that follow, we cover each of these elements in detail.

Finding the Right Story to Pitch

There's rarely a dull moment in the nonprofit world.

And that means your nonprofit is probably overflowing with great stories, even if you don't yet realize it.

What makes a good media story? How can you figure out what will resonate with a broad audience?

They include:

- **A problem and a solution:** What's the challenge you're addressing and how are you addressing it?
- **Human interest:** In other words, more stories! Bringing the problem and solution to life through the powerful story of one person (or a family, or an animal, etc.) is the best way to capture people's attention – and hearts.
- **An element of emotion:** Again, a story that elicits strong emotions in your audience will help them not only understand your work, but remember it – and take action.
- **A call to action:** What do you want your audience to do once they've heard your story? Buy tickets, donate, volunteer? Whatever it is, be clear about what you need and how people can take action to be part of the solution.

Identifying and Training Your Spokespeople

It can be tempting to rely solely on your organization's executive director or CEO to serve as your main media spokesperson.

And that's okay – they're the face of your organization and putting their voice out there consistently can help build your brand's public image.

But don't forget about all of the other incredible people involved with your organization who could bring a whole other dimension to your PR efforts.

Here are a few ideas for other individuals you may want to approach:

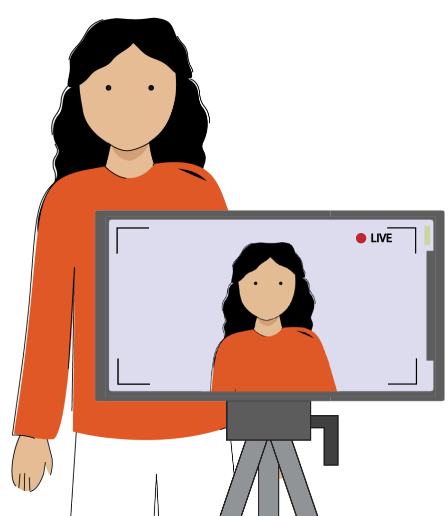
- **If your story is about a fundraising event**, try engaging someone who might benefit from the funds that will be raised. For example: if you're a food bank, can you connect with a person or family who accessed your services in the past and wants to share the impact your organization created in their lives?
- **If your story is about a new research project** you're launching, ask the person leading the research if they'd be comfortable speaking with the media about it.
- **If your story is about a new program being launched,** ask one of your service staff to participate in your media efforts. For example, if your program is an in-school mentoring initiative, can you ask a program coordinator or a volunteer mentor to be your spokesperson?
- **If your story is about a major gift you've just secured,** ask the donor if they'd be willing to share their motivations behind the gift. This is also another great opportunity to ask someone who has benefitted or will benefit from funding support to be interviewed.

Once you've confirmed your spokespeople, don't forget to prep them!

You don't need to invest in formal media training to have effective spokespeople. But you do need to help them feel prepared both in terms of knowledge and what to expect.

Here are a few top tips for getting your spokespeople media-ready:

- Equip them with comprehensive key messages about the story being covered – everything from specific details to research to back it up. Make sure they have enough time to study the key messages and ask clarifying questions.
- Provide them with a detailed briefing note sharing the time and location of their interview, who will be interviewing them, what to wear and who their on-site contact will be. Try your best to avoid any surprises.
- Remind them that they are representing your organization and everything they say during their interview and in the vicinity of the media will reflect on your work and cause.
- Make sure they know to never share confidential information or comment on internal issues unless speaking points have been carefully crafted around specific topics.
- Get a sense of their availability around the time you're hoping to secure media coverage. This way you'll avoid too much back-and-forth with your spokesperson and your media contacts about scheduling interviews, reducing stress for everyone.



Making a Media List

You've got your story, you've identified your spokespeople and you're ready to hit the ground running, right? Not yet!

Before you can issue your press release, you need a list of media contacts to send it to.

You can go about creating a media list in a couple of different ways.

- **Build it from scratch:** Time to bust out a fresh new Excel spreadsheet! Hit up Google and start looking into the best contacts at your chosen media outlets (see our advice below for how to choose your targets).

- **Pay for a media service:** They're not cheap, but press release distribution services offered by companies like PR Newswire or The Canadian Press will do the heavy lifting for you and give you access to a much bigger media network than you may be able to achieve on your own.

Whether you're building your list from scratch or have decided to invest in a service, you'll need to figure out who should be on your media list.

A paid service can help you define the exact lists to use from among their options, but if you're going it alone, here are some tips for building a high-quality list.

Your list can include a combination of editors – the people who assign stories to journalists – and journalists themselves, who pitch stories to their editors.

You'll only want to include one or two of the highest quality contacts at each organization you're targeting, so make sure you're choosing them well.

If you're developing your own media list, find the editors or journalists who are focused on topics related to your cause or objectives.

For example, if your organization's mission is to improve education outcomes for at-risk youth, find editors or journalists who focus on education, youth issues, community issues and even politics (because we all know education can sadly be a political issue).

If you're working with vulnerable women, find contacts interested in women, health, family, social justice, community and so on.

And make sure you're targeting contacts focused on your geographic boundaries. If you're seeking local coverage only, go for editors and journalists who cover local issues. If you're hoping for national coverage, find the best national contacts.

Remember: journalists are always looking for a good story — and sometimes that means they'll reach out to you directly if they're seeking your expertise.

To make sure they can find you, check out Cision's HARO (Help A Reporter) service, where individuals or organizations with unique knowledge can sign up to receive inquiries from reporters looking for expert insights. This is another great way to build media contacts.

Writing and Distributing a Nonprofit Press Release

Before you can start raking in those media hits, you need to know the basics of developing a high-quality press release that journalists won't be able to ignore.

It's not uncommon for media organizations to receive hundreds of press releases every single day, so you need to make sure yours stands out.

We've got you covered. Just follow these best practices and you'll be well on your way to securing great media coverage for your nonprofit.

Using the Inverted Pyramid Approach to Write Your Press Release

If you're not already familiar with the inverted pyramid style of writing, now is a great time to learn!

The inverted pyramid approach essentially means frontloading a press release or article with the most important information right at the beginning.

The "need to know" details are followed by further context, including quotes. Your release then ends with brief information about your organization and contact details.

This format ensures busy readers can quickly and easily understand the main point of your press release without having to search for it.

It also offers a classic, consistent style of communicating information that helps journalists efficiently review the many press releases they receive every day.

Here's a graphic from [Marketers Media]() that breaks down exactly what you should be including in each section of your "pyramid."

Follow These Formatting Standards

But what about some of the more nuanced elements of press releases?

Press releases should follow accepted formatting standards, which will maximize your chances of having your press release read.

These standards include:

- Use your organization's official letterhead.
- Use a short, attention grabbing headline that gets right to the heart of your story. A subhead can also be used to share need-to-know secondary information.
- Always include the date and the city in which the news is being announced.
- Include key information and background details related to the news item being shared. This is another critical time to rely on the "who, what, where, when, why and how" checklist.
- Try to stick to one page or no more than two pages.
- Include one or more quotes from key representatives, usually the head of your organization.
- Always offer contact information for media inquiries.
- Include a brief paragraph about your organization (also called your boilerplate) at the end of your release.
- It can be helpful to include a bulleted list summarizing key messages or key details to make sure that information is clearly and immediately visible.
- Add a symbol or word indicating the end of the press release (such as the commonly used "-30-" or "###" symbols).

Still feeling a little unsure about where to start? Our [free nonprofit press release template]() takes all the guesswork out of the process! And once you've used this a few times, developing a press release from scratch will start to feel like child's play.

How to Issue Your Press Release

Here are the best practices when it comes to preparing your press release for distribution:

- When you issue your press release, be sure to attach it as a PDF and include a text version in the body of your email.
- Important: Make sure to BCC your contacts! Include your own email address in the "to" field if leaving it blank makes you feel twitchy.
- Write a quick introductory note indicating that you thought your contacts may be interested in this news item from your organization and to please contact you to learn more or schedule interviews.

When to Issue Your Press Release – and When to Follow Up

Your press release is approved, your media list is ready to go and your distribution email has been prepared – but when do you hit send? Here are some best practices around timing:

- **One week out:** Issue your release one week before your big announcement/event/report release/program launch date to give your contacts time to work your story into their coverage schedule.
- **The day before:** One day before your announcement/event/release/launch date, follow up with your media contacts by forwarding your original distribution email (remember to BCC everyone again) and including a note indicating that you're following up and reminding them that your big day is tomorrow.

After sending your reminder email, follow it up with a round of phone calls to your media contacts to see if you can get someone on the phone. More often than not, speaking to an actual human and having an opportunity to share more details about your story will result in a media opportunity.

If there is no specific date associated with your story, simply issue your release and follow it up with a round of phone calls.

03

Managing Media Relationships

Congratulations! You secured your first round of media coverage for a great story.

But don't just take the coverage and run off into the sunset.

Nurturing relationships with your media contacts is a great strategy for improving your chances of securing future opportunities.

After your interviews have been completed and your story has been aired or published, make sure to send thank-you notes to the editors, journalists or other contacts you've been working with.

Let them know how much you appreciated their support and that you look forward to working with them again.

Then, when you're ready to make your next pitch, send your press release directly to those contacts with a personalized note (while still sending it off to the rest of your media list as well!).

You'll be much more likely to get a response – and coverage – if you put in the time and effort to build real relationships.

What About Paid Media?

We've talked all about how to successfully pitch a story to the media, but did you know you can also pay for media exposure?

Paid media advertising – as opposed to earned media, or free media hits achieved through your own PR efforts – can be a highly effective way of reaching your target audiences while maintaining tight control over your message.

This type of PR can range from a small ad placed in your local newspaper to a full-page (or even multiple page) advertorial in a national daily, which is a story written to feel like a typical newspaper article that's been paid for and managed by your organization.

Paid media opportunities typically also come with a digital component (or may even be exclusive to digital). For example, you could opt to have an advertorial appear both in print and online, or you could arrange to have a series of ads appear on a media outlet's website for a certain number of days.

The options are really endless when it comes to paid media. But beware: this approach can also come at a steep cost, especially for national exposure.

If you're interested in exploring the world of paid media advertising, first ask yourself these questions:

- Who do we want to reach?
- What do we want them to know?
- What do we want them to do?
- Do we want local, regional or national exposure?
- How much are we willing to spend?

Once you've answered these questions, start contacting the advertising departments of a few different media outlets to learn more about their reach, demographics and paid media options at different price points.

Bonus tip: radio advertising can be one of the most effective and most budget-friendly forms of paid media advertising, so don't forget to reach out to your favourite radio stations!

Boosting the Reach of Your Media Hits

Whether you've secured earned media hits or have put some money toward paid media advertising, you'll want to give some thought to boosting your reach even further.

With any PR or marketing initiative, it's critical to lean on your existing channels and your community to spread your message as much as possible.

Here are a few ideas for getting your media exposure to work even harder for you:

- Share your media coverage through your organization's social media channels. This may seem obvious, but it's a step that's often overlooked.
- Send out an eblast to your email distribution list sharing the story (if it's relevant and interesting enough to do so, that is).
- Ask your board members to share the story with their networks. LinkedIn is a great place for board directors to share news and information about nonprofits they're involved with.
- Encourage your fundraisers to share the story with their prospects, where appropriate. Media coverage can offer a great excuse to touch base with donors or prospects and highlight the impact they could help create.

Measuring Your Results and Reach

You've followed our advice and secured some media coverage – congrats! That's it, right? Nope!

It's important to both track and measure your media exposure for a few reasons, such as:

- Understanding what worked and what didn't
- Continuously improving your PR efforts
- Building PR into your annual marketing and communications activities
- Keeping a handle on what you've already pitched so you can plan ahead for future pitches
- Reporting back to management and the board on the success of your efforts

So, how can you both track and measure your media coverage?

First, create a spreadsheet that you regularly update with details of your secured coverage. Include details like:

- The media outlet (name, type, local/regional/national)
- The date of the coverage
- A link to the coverage
- A brief description of the coverage
- What the story was about
- The spokespeople offered and featured
- The name of your main contact

Then, come up with a simple system for rating the quality of the coverage. Develop a score based on criteria such as:

- **The quality of the media outlet.** For example, a post by a blogger with a limited following might score a 1 while a national daily newspaper would score a 10.
- **The quality of the coverage.** For example, a brief mention might score a 1 while an article or broadcast entirely dedicated to your story would score a 10.

Scoring can be fairly subjective, so make sure your system reflects your needs and goals for media coverage. Perhaps you don't care for (or even need) national media coverage and a high-quality story in a local newspaper would be a 10 in your book.

You'll also want to measure the reach and impact of your coverage. For each story, track details like:

- **Social media mentions.** Did your article create a buzz on social media? Make sure to record the number of mentions, shares and likes your coverage generated.
- **Traffic to your website.** Did the number of unique visitors to your website suddenly increase after your story was published? Write it down!
- **Media impressions.** This means the number of times your content appears in front of someone, whether that's via a physical newspaper, on a media outlet's website or on social media.

Calculating media impressions can be a bit tricky for digital content, since you can't exactly ask a media outlet to share with you the number of times an earned media article was clicked (but you can do this for paid media advertising – in fact, a report back to you on your reach and impressions should be part of your package).

To keep it simple, just record the daily circulation or digital reach of the media outlet where your story appeared. This information can usually be found on an outlet's website or by contacting their advertising department.

You're All Set!

That's it! Piece of cake, right?

Actually, PR really is pretty straightforward.

It all comes down to identifying a compelling story, developing a great press release and a solid media list and building relationships with media contacts.

At the heart of PR? Connecting great stories with the people who love to tell them.

So, what are you waiting for? Get out there and start digging into the exciting world of nonprofit PR!