



Communications Toolkit - A Beginner's Guide

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A Beginner's Guide to Communications

PR and media relations can make a huge difference when you're promoting an idea, project or message. This guide will help you raise the profile of your work and encourage conversation around the things that matter to you. It will explain how you can share key messages about your organisation through editorial coverage in the media. It will help you write media releases, invite journalists to events, arrange photography and video, and generate social media buzz around your work.

How PR and media relations can help you

Media relations refers to any interaction with journalists. It is an essential part of raising the profile of your work and providing in-depth information to the public. Media relations can be targeted to specific journalists, media outlets, regions or sectors. The scale of your media relations will depend on the time and resources you have. Anything is possible with enough time! Media relations can help:

- Raise public awareness of your projects and organisation.
- Increase understanding of your organisation and the work you are doing.
- Create a positive profile of the organisation through good news stories.

Editorial refers to articles written or recorded by journalists, whereas advertisement and advertorials are paid-for. This guide will focus on editorial. However, editorial coverage is not guaranteed. Even sending a media release to a journalist does not necessarily mean coverage. Every story is dependent on how interesting the news is, what else is happening in the area and how much editorial space is available. If, for any reason, the story doesn't make it to print/production don't be too disappointed. Keep trying with other stories and angles and the coverage will begin to come through.



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Building successful media relations

Media relations is a competition and newsrooms are flooded with media releases, which makes the competition even harder. Building relationships with journalists and being selective about where you want coverage to reach will go a long way towards getting your message heard.

There are three tiers of media in Scotland:

- Local media: free local newspapers, newsletters and community radio stations. For example the Newmachar News, Westhill Bulletin and Mearns FM.
- Regional media: bigger media outlets with a wider regional area. This includes The Deeside Piper, The Aberdeen Evening Express, P&J and Original FM.
- National media: nationwide media outlets that cover stories from across Scotland, the UK and around the world. For example, The Scotsman, The National, The Herald, BBC Radio Scotland and STV.
- Specialist trade media: charity/third sector/public sector outlets read by a specialist audience. For example, Holyrood Magazine or Third Force News.

We suggest speaking to journalists about your current activities, future plans and to let them know there may be more stories in the pipeline.

Be realistic about the story you're suggesting. Ask yourself:

- Does this journalist / media outlet cover stories in this area?
- Why would they be interested in this story?
- How can I make the story more interesting to them?



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Drafting/issuing a media release

A media release is the best way to share information with a journalist about your work. These can be emailed to relevant journalists to support your story. The essential things to get across in the release are:

- **Who?** Who are the key organisations and people that need to be mentioned? Who does your news affect/who does it benefit?
- **What?** What is new?
- **Why?** Why is this important?
- **Where?** Where is this happening/is there a geographic angle/is the location relevant?
- **When?** What is the timing of this? Does this add significance?
- **How?** How did this come about?

Timing

Most newspapers/magazines/media outlets will have a deadline day for publication. Take this into consideration where possible.

Headline

The headline is the first thing journalists will read at the top of the media release. It should grab attention and encourage the journalist to read the rest of the story.

Paragraphs

Avoid long and complicated sentences and keep the release as compact as possible. The ideal length of a media release is one A4 page or about 400-500 words. If the media release is longer than two pages, it suggests it's an article rather than a media release.

- A release should include three or four short, punchy paragraphs and a quote.
- The first line should be a summary of the story (in no more than around 15-20 words).
- End the release with contact details and notes to editors (who should the journalist contact if they have questions and provide background information on the organisation/project).



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Do not include background information about your organisation in the opening paragraph. This – along with any additional information – should be included in a “notes to editor” section at the end of the release (see sample news release for example).

Include Statistics

If claiming a trend, presenting a report or outcomes of an event/campaign, use proof to back it up. Always back your news story with hard numbers that support the significance of the announcement. By quantifying the argument, it will become much more compelling to the reader and media.

Include a quote

Every media release should include one or two quotes from relevant sources. Start the quote by stating the name and title of the spokesperson. Eg. Chris White, director of AVA, said: “[Insert quote]”. The quote should reinforce the key messages of the media release. It should be no longer than two paragraphs or 70 words.

Style/Font

Use a clear and clear font throughout the media release. Eg.

- Font: Arial (Body): 1.5 spacing
- Font size: Headline: size 14 Bold
- Main body: size 11
- Contact details: size 11 Bold

Logo: Include your organisation logo at the top of the release to ensure the journalist can immediately see who it's from.



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Issuing the media release

When issuing the media release, send the release in the body of an email – making sure that it looks tidy and uniformed. Do not send the release as an attachment, as many journalists won't open it. If you're sending it to a number of journalists, always send emails individually or with email addresses in the Bcc line of your email. You don't want everyone seeing who else has the story. When sending out a media release we suggest following up by telephone to check that a journalist has received it and to ask if they need more information.

Think widely – not just the news pages

Even though news pages are the most obvious place to communicate your messages, other sections can be equally as useful.

- **Business:** is there a business, economic or industry angle?
- **Lifestyle:** does your project or organisation have access to case studies that demonstrate help and advice they can provide to real people?
- **Sport:** is the story sports related?
- **Letters to editor:** if you read an article that relates to your organisation or an issue that your organisation is heavily involved in, there is opportunity to respond by writing a letter or sending an email to the newspaper's editor.



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Sample Media Release Format



NEWS RELEASE FOR IMMEDIATE USE: [day, date year]

Aberdeenshire Voluntary Action launches [project info]

[News angle – including statistics, key organisations and news hook] **was announced today by Aberdeenshire Voluntary Action.**

This follows [additional information – including more research, relevant information and details of news angle]

[More detail but less important information]

[Name], [title] at [organisation], **said:** “[insert quote]”

Further information is available by visiting [website address].

ENDS

For more information, please contact [name, email address and phone number].

Notes to Editors [Any additional information]



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Drafting/issuing media invites

Inviting media to an event or video/photo opportunity is a great way to increase awareness of the event before, during and afterwards. To let journalists know the event is taking place and to invite them along, you should send a media invite.

Putting it together

A media invite should include:

- Key information about the event or video/photo opportunity, including the name of the venue, date and location.
- Details of what will happen at the event – e.g. news announcements, photography or video opportunities, etc.
- Information on speakers, organisations backing the event and influential people attending.
- Background info on your organisation. There's a template below which can be used for inviting media to an event.

Sending the media invite

We suggest sending out the invites to formal events 4-5 weeks in advance, as this allows the journalists to make changes to their schedule if required. Always follow up a few days before the event to check attendance. Media invites for video/photo opportunities should be sent to picture desks and broadcast journalists 2-3 days in advance. You should also follow up on the day.

Being aware of journalist's location is key to determine whether or not they'll be able to make it along. Some questions to consider:

- Where is the journalist located?
- Does the media outlet send reporters to cover events in this area?
- Would it be worthwhile getting them to attend, or will the story work better as a press release?



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Sample Media Invite Format



MEDIA CALLING NOTICE

What: Aberdeenshire Voluntary Action hosts [xx] event as part of xx

When: [start time – end time], [date]

Where: [venue name], [full address, including postcode]

Contact: [your name], [phone number], [email address]

Background: On [date], Aberdeenshire Voluntary Action will host an exciting event as part of [info]. Media are invited to [venue name] to photograph and film [details of event]. [Background info on project including information about the event and key speakers/key individuals/organisations that will attend.]

For further information please visit: [website address]

To confirm attendance, please contact [contact name, email and telephone number].

ENDS



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Setting up case studies

Telling the stories of real people can be a powerful way to bring complex stories to life. Where possible, arrange case studies who have experienced the issues you plan to discuss. For example, if the project was about youth engagement in Peterhead – you could arrange for three local young people who are part of the project to talk to media about their experiences of engaging and how it has helped them.

Getting a good story

This can be the hard part – if you're dealing with a sensitive subject, it's often difficult to get people to talk about it. The case study must be prepared for their story to appear in print, on TV or on the radio. The story should include:

- A strong connection to the project.
- An example of the project in action.
- Positive outcomes relating to your work.
- An emotional angle which will connect with the media outlet's audience.

Presenting the story

Where possible, write up the story as one page A4 document. Include the key aspects, details of the case study's background and explain how it fits with your news story. Email this to the journalist alongside your pitch - a brief overview of the story and the angle you think they could take. Include all key details and news hooks in your pitch.

Preparing a case study for an interview

Here are some useful tips you can give a case study to prepare them for an interview:

- Look for positives.
- Don't say anything you wouldn't want to appear in print the following day.
- Avoid names and locations of people who haven't given you permission to talk about them.
- If you feel uncomfortable say "I'd rather not talk about that" or "I'll provide that information after the interview by email."



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Photography and video

If there is a scope to use photography or video with your story, it's a great way to get your message across and make a big impact. Having strong images / video of your event/story is a great way to secure coverage in local newspapers or on their website. Unfortunately, not all media outlets will be able to send a photographer on the day.

We recommend hiring a freelance photographer, but if your budget does not stretch to this then please use these following guidelines when taking pictures:

Who: photograph members of the public, staff and volunteers enjoying the event – try to pick people who will make an interesting picture e.g. happy children, people enjoying themselves at the event.

Always ask permission first – you'll find consent forms at the back of this document. School children may have received this permission in advance, so check with the class teacher and identify if there are any children who do not have permission.

What: colourful and engaging pictures that capture the imagination and tell the story of your event. This could include outdoor shots, fun pictures with props or action shots.

Where: pick a bright, naturally lit location whenever possible.

When: take pictures throughout the event if it looks good but remember it's also a good idea to make time before or after the event to stage some pictures.

Why: create high quality pictures for media, posting on Facebook or Twitter, and uploading to the news section of your website.

Top tips

- Resolution – your photography should be at least 2480 x 3508 pixels. To take this standard of photography you should use a digital camera or high-resolution smartphone.
- Variety – take a mixture of landscape and portrait photography.
- Take a mixture of posed and candid shots.
- Try to avoid lots of people in suits.
- Ask people to remove name badges



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Issuing photography to media

Pictures should be sent to newspaper picture desks, not to news desks.

They should always contain a photo caption including information about where and when they were taken, who is in the pictures and what their role was. The photo caption should tell the story of the event.

When there is more than one person, always state "Left to right..." then list the people in the picture from left to right, as well as any further details that are relevant (i.e. where, when).

Left -Right: [insert names from left to right]

Today [event info] was hosted by [organisation] to promote [info]. It was attended by [attendee info] to [info]. For further information please contact [your name, email and phone number]

Booking and briefing a photographer / videographer

If you are booking a professional photographer or videographer, you need to brief them in advance, so they understand the purpose and requirements of the photographs. This will help them prepare and ultimately get the pictures you want.

Always provide a written photography brief or videography brief in advance. What the brief should cover:

- Background info – define the purpose of the photo shoot, inform the photographer on what, where, how and why the images will be used.
- Shots required – specify how the images should be composed and who/what they should portray.
- Required – be clear about deadlines, format and responsibilities on the day.



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Photography/Videography Brief sample



Photography / videography brief

Photographer: [Photographer / videographer name and contact details]

What: [Event name]

Date & Time: [Time], [Date]

Location: [Insert location details, address and postcode]

Contact: [Your name], [phone number and email address]

Background:

To promote [info].

What: We are looking for editorial images / videos that will be sent to [insert media outlet or type of communication channel]. We are looking to have a selection of photos taken of the [subject(s)].

Shots required: The images / video are to portray [info]. Below are some suggested shots but please use your creative knowledge on the day to get the best and most impactful shots for media: [insert some picture / video ideas]. Please use your creative licence on the day to attain the best images/footage.

Required: Please send a selection of the best landscape and portrait shots in [insert info on format] to [your name], [phone [email address] by [insert deadline].



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Social media

Facebook and Twitter can be very strong communications tools to raise awareness of your organisation and to engage with the online community and supporters of your project. You can use your own social media accounts or your organisation's accounts to share exciting updates, share photos related to your work, give an opinion on relevant issues or interact with influential people and organisations.

Facebook

Facebook is a good platform to promote your own events, announcements and news. It's a great place to share links to articles, videos and pictures. If your post is organic (free) then it will only reach the people who have liked your page. The more likes and comments your post receives, the greater the number of people will see what you post. To boost a post's reach, you can sponsor (pay for) it. Your budget can be as big or small as your finances allow. This service will share your post with people not already following your page. There's also the option to tag specific groups of people. Facebook has many helpful guides on how to set up sponsored posts.

Our top tips for Facebook:

- Always use engaging wording and images – these are more likely to stand out on people's newsfeed and gain greater engagement.
- Try to keep your posts between 60 and 120 characters to get more engagement – short, concise posts are better received.
- Create a two-way conversation - ask your audience to share thoughts and feedback.
- Remember to link and tag your organisation and others.
- You can shorten long links by using bitly.com.



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Twitter

Twitter is a public place to share thoughts and information. It's a good way to publicly interact with brands, organisations and public figures. Where possible include a picture, video or link to make it more interesting. You have a maximum of 140 characters when writing a tweet. Our top tips for Twitter:

- Tweet frequently and make sure your tweets are informative, useful and fun.
- Retweet interesting posts related to your subject area.
- Join the wider conversation by using relevant hashtags – Twitter has tutorials to help with this, if you're not sure how to do it.

Points to remember when using social media

- Never insult or offend people using social media – it's a public platform and anyone could be reading it.
- Try not to sound like a robot – add warmth, colour and personality to posts.
- If in doubt, try it out. Sign up for Facebook and Twitter to see if they work for your organisation – chances are, you'll find a whole new audience you didn't know existed.
- Choose the platforms you use carefully. There are many options, and it is best not to stretch yourself too thinly. Work out what your audience is most likely to use and prioritise that.



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Appendix 1: Referring to Aberdeenshire Voluntary Action

Background information about Aberdeenshire Voluntary Action

AVA are part of a Scotland-wide network of Third Sector Interfaces (TSIs) called the [TSI Scotland Network](#) - we are one of 32 working with communities across the country. AVA is Aberdeenshire's TSI, and our mission is to promote the growth of strong, resilient communities in Aberdeenshire by connecting, supporting, and promoting volunteers, charities, community-led organisations, and social enterprises collectively referred to as the Third Sector. Funded by the Scottish Government and Aberdeenshire's Health and Social Care Partnership, the AVA team operates across the length & breadth of Aberdeenshire, supporting volunteers and organisations from Portsoy and St Combs in the north, to Braemar in the west and Laurencekirk and St Cyrus in the south. AVA has a growing membership comprising of volunteers and organisations representing a diverse cross-section of the Third Sector in Aberdeenshire. Visit: www.avashire.org.uk.

Scottish Charity Number: SC014223 Company Number: SC137343.

Postal address: PO BOX 18706, Peterhead, AB42 9BA. Registered office: 45 Queens Road, Aberdeen, AB15 4ZN.



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Appendix 2: Photography consent form

To be completed by individual(s) (parents/guardians if subject is less than 18 years of age) before photographs are taken.

I hereby grant (insert name of organisation) the right to use the photograph(s) resulting from the photo shoot, and any reproductions or adaptations of the photograph(s) for all general purposes in relation to (insert name of organisation)'s work including, without limitation, the right to use them in any publicity materials, websites, newspapers and magazine articles whenever (insert name of organisation) to do so.

Name (please print).....

Address.....

.....

Signature.....Date.....

Name and address of parent/guardian if person to be photographed is less than 18 years of age

Name (please print).....

Address.....

.....

Signature.....Date.....