



# Tips to Improving Communication with the Media

Your step-by-step guide to working with the media in your community

**Decoda**  
LITERACY SOLUTIONS

## PR Toolkit - Table of Contents

	PAGE
<b>Introduction</b> .....	2
<b>How to contact local media</b> .....	3
Why is the media important?.....	3
Contacting the media & promoting your event .....	3
Making your story appealing to the media .....	4
<b>How to make a local media list</b> .....	6
What is a media list .....	6
Get to know your media.....	6
Using a media advisory.....	7
Approaching your contacts .....	8
<b>Tips on talking to the Media</b> .....	8
<b>Managing media on event day</b> .....	9
<b>PR/Media relations timeline</b> .....	10

## INTRODUCTION

As a valuable partner in your effort to build a culture of community-based literacy and learning in British Columbia, we're here to provide you with the support you need when it comes to working with the media. Whether you are trying to promote an event in your community; highlight a program or individual; or respond to a major literacy initiative as representative of Decoda Literacy Solutions - this kit will help.

We want you to succeed in your efforts with the media. We also want to ensure that the most up-to-date and accurate information is reaching the public so that all parties are represented fairly and accurately. The kit contains tips, tools and guidelines for working with the media, as well as some sample documents and tables for you to reference and sample at your discretion.

We are also prepared to provide you with the following types of information: literacy facts and figures; key messaging for events/announcements; specific literacy information; dates and contact information for Decoda-related events, programs and information sources and contact people.

If you have any questions at all regarding the media and or require any assistance in preparing for a media campaign to promote literacy, do not hesitate to contact us.

Regards,

Mike Leland  
Director, Communications  
Ph. 604.375.4042  
mleland@decoda.ca

## HOW TO CONTACT LOCAL MEDIA

### WHY IS THE MEDIA IMPORTANT?

Think of the media as gatekeepers to your community. By talking to one journalist you may be able to share your experiences and key information about your event with hundreds/thousands of individuals in your community.

Sometimes getting your story told or event promoted is as easy as picking up the phone to your local editor. But the reality is that on most days the media is contacted hundreds of times by people just like you who want their story told.

Your best chance to get your story told is to *understand what they want, how they want it and how to deliver it*. We hope this toolkit will provide you with exactly those tools.

### TIPS TO CONTACTING THE MEDIA AND PROMOTING YOUR EVENT:

- **Know who to contact** before picking up the phone to ensure you're pitching to the right person. If you plan to go to more than one media source, build a targeted media list of contact names. The best place to start is the media outlet's Web page.
- Generally, you will want to look for the following contacts:  
**Print** - Editor  
**Radio** - Programming Manager / Assignment Editor / News Editor  
**TV** - Assignment Editor / Producer.
- **Know how to contact** the media. It's important to know how and when to contact the media. Some editors / producers want phone calls and others prefer email. Contacting the media inappropriately or at the wrong time - such as on deadline - can lead to damaged relationships. A rule of thumb - earlier in the day is always better than late in the day, especially for TV and radio. And know when they go to print!
- **Pitch by phone** whenever possible. This will get you better results and allow you to build the relationships you need to ensure consistent success. It's much easier for someone to delete an email or send a "no" than it is to hang up on you. Call after you send your release or advisory to ensure they received it.
- **Develop your message** before delivering your pitch. Most reporters are extremely busy and will give you only 60-90 seconds to make your case. They will not bite on your idea if you don't offer a convincing argument...and even though we think our story is worthwhile, that doesn't mean they do. Remember, Decoda can help you with fact sheets, key messages, program descriptions, etc.

- **Ask whether it is a good time to talk** when calling a reporter. Remember, they are extremely busy people. If he/she says yes, introduce yourself fully, reference previous conversations (if applicable) to jog the reporter's memory on who you are and why you're calling. Be as specific as possible - the more general you are, the less likely your chances for success. As you develop a relationship with the reporter (and that should be your goal) it will be easier to get their ear.
- **Leave ONE message only** and then continue to call the reporter at different times of the day (non-deadline times, of course) until you catch them live. You have to be tenacious with some reporters. Once you have them on the line, it is much easier to make your case, as you can engage a reporter in a conversation and handle objections as they arise.
- **When sending your story via email**, use the following rules:
  - always send your info in the body of the email - not as an attachment.
  - ensure you craft a catchy subject line - don't give it all away in the title
  - include a short pitch along with your contact information
  - don't use all caps or excessive punctuation - this is a flag that your pitch might be a virus
  - if it is in relation to a Decoda event / program, include the URL - a reporter will often visit the Web before calling back
  - never send out a group email with your entire distribution list in the header.**\*\*\*NOTE:** some people prefer to call *BEFORE* they send your press release *NOT AFTER*. It gives them a heads up and increases the chance of them picking it out of the 100's of releases they see every day. This really up to you!
- **Never make promises you cannot keep.** Nothing will squelch a media relationship faster than if you promise something you cannot deliver. Promise to do your best to get the reporter what they need in advance of their deadline, and *always* follow through. However, if you won't be able to come through, let them know as early as possible.

## TIPS TO MAKE YOUR STORY / EVENT APPEALING TO THE MEDIA

- **Give them an exclusive.** If a media outlet receives an important story first, it might consider it big news because they will have a "scoop" that makes them look good.
- **Make it different or unusual.** Stories that are new, novel, or original are news because they have the "gee whiz" factor. If you're event is an annual, then find the "new" element of feature of it to pitch.
- **Be at the extreme.** Any kind of superlative that can be used in the story--first, biggest, smallest, or oldest--can provide the "gee whiz" element.

- **Be part of the solution.** The media hear a lot about the negative impact of the issues we seek to address. If you can position your cause as a rare “good news” story, it will be an attention getter. If your event is helping solve a problem, let it be known.
- **Put a face on the story.** Compelling human-interest angles of any kind are news, because journalists are always looking to put a human face on their stories. *NOTE:* the media are partial to stories involving children and animals.
- **Make it local.** A local angle on a national news story is news to media in your community. When pitching the local media, keep the emphasis on the word “local.”
- **Provide pictures.** Newspapers and magazines love photos and TV reporters have to bring in visuals to get a story on the air. Let the media outlet know that photo opportunities are available. If dealing with a small publication, have some photos of your own to contribute.
- **Always keep in mind** that you don’t want to pitch your organization or Decoda as the product or service to the media; you want to pitch the outcome and the benefits of your efforts or your event.

## THINK LIKE A JOURNALIST

It is important to keep in mind that a reporter will only give a pitch seconds to pique his/her interest. Pitches should be concise and answer key questions a reporter will undoubtedly ask when deciding if a story idea will make the cut.

Be sure to ask yourself the following questions before pitching your story:

- **Why do I care?** Journalists are looking for stories that have an impact on their readers. At RH, we try to make that connection for journalists and explain why a journalist should care and how the story impacts their readers.
- **Why now?** A news story must have “today value” and it is our job to demonstrate urgency. Why should a reporter write about this today? If you are pitching a story about boating safety, it is unlikely that a reporter will be interested during a stormy week. Our team is consistently monitoring news cycles and looking for opportunities to tie our clients’ news into them.
- **How is this new?** When I was a reporter, I cringed when someone would send an email and say, “I saw your story about X, you should write about my company too.” This is not enough to entice a reporter to write another story on the same topic. Chances are if they covered it once, they won’t write again unless you are offering something new. As a PR team it is our responsibility to look for a new angle and offer something that hasn’t been done before.

- **What can you offer?** Reporters are busy and, like many industries, they are pressed to do more with less. When developing pitches, we outline what we can offer to bring the story to life, including things like visuals, subject matter expert interviews and compelling data. We work to make it clear to the reporter how our clients can be a resource for their story, making it as easy as possible for them.
- A pitch that helps to answer these questions will have a better chance of winning over a reporter, an editor and the audience.

## HOW TO MAKE A LOCAL MEDIA LIST

### WHAT IS A MEDIA LIST?

A media list is a database containing names and information about media who can help promote your event, program or story. In the case you are promoting an event, you will send a media advisory (see appendix A&B for templates) inviting media in your community to interview your local spokesperson in advance of your event and to attend the event itself.

When compiling your media list, collect as many relevant contacts as possible. Start by thinking about the media in your community - newspapers, radio stations, television stations - anyone who might publicize, or help promote your event / program / story. Then use the phone book, Internet and other resources to locate contact information for each source.

\*IF you're running an event, your media list should also include contacts for community event calendars/listings.

### *Your media list should contain the following information:*

- Name - full name of the person you are contacting
- Media outlet - name of the newspaper, radio station or television station you are contacting; if an outlet has more than one news program, record each program as a separate entry on your media list.
- E-mail - most journalists have a public e-mail address, and social media feed, but sometimes you may only be able to locate a generic e-mail address (e.g., editor@albernavalleytimes.ca)
- Telephone - keep in mind that the contact may have more than one telephone number
- Notes - use this area to keep track of your follow-up with the contact

Name	Media outlet	E-mail	Telephone	Notes

## GET TO KNOW YOUR MEDIA LIST

Each media type has different needs when it comes to how they present their news and feature stories:

- **Television** producers and journalists often look for quick quotes and visuals that can be captured on camera.
- **Radio** producers and hosts usually present news items as quick news updates, often based on what is in the newspaper, or they do phone-in discussions that are either taped in advance or done live on the air.
- **Print** and web formats, such as newspapers and websites, cover stories in more depth, often seeking a greater explanation of an issue along with facts.

## USING A MEDIA ADVISORY

The media advisory is a tool to encourage media to interview your spokesperson about your event. A media advisory is typically sent via e-mail (as mentioned earlier, copy and paste the text into the body of an e-mail), but can also be printed and sent via fax if media prefer this method. Today the media is looking to social media sites more and more often for their information.

Ideally you want to have one media advisory and a press release (one to distribute to media in advance - the pre-event media advisory (appendix 1); and one to distribute to media on event day - the event day media release (appendix 2)). Your first advisory should contain information relevant to your event, including location, time and date, name of local spokesperson(s) and your contact information. The advisory puts your event on their radar. To sell you event...it is best to contact them in person. The media release for the day of or post-event should contain relevant info about the day, i.e. number of people who attended, purpose of the event, anything that was outstanding and a quote from someone connected to the event about the success and or outcome of the event. This should go out shortly after the event is over.

## APPROACH THE CONTACTS ON YOUR MEDIA LIST

Don't be afraid to contact the media. Remember, journalists need story ideas and welcome the opportunity to interview someone with a compelling story or event.

### Always respect deadlines!

When calling, always ask if it is a good time. Know when they go to print or on air and DO NOT call during those times. Call and state why you think the topic or issue is important to their audience, share basic facts and explain why you think the reporter should want to interview you or your local spokesperson. You should always communicate your own personal experience or connection to the event, program or cause. Send your media advisory with all the relevant information...followed by a call.

## TIPS ON TALKING TO THE MEDIA

Once you have distributed your media advisories and started following up with your contacts via telephone, the hope is that media in your community will request more information and interviews.

A reporter may want to talk to you about your event and/or may want to talk to your local spokesperson as well.

**Prior to an interview, be certain to prepare.** Carefully review the main points you want to get across. If promoting one of Decoda's events or speaking on a position, please prepare with the key message document Decoda provides. These messages are the key points you want to try and communicate to the reporter during an interview.

Although the majority of the time the media will cover your event because it is a "good story" and a benefit to the community, the reality is that conflict, scandal and controversy do sell newspapers. Sometimes unfortunately the media will unintentionally or intentionally flush out the negative side of a story and without your knowledge run "their version." This is not something you or Decoda wants. Here are some tips to keep in mind.

***Tips to control your message and maximize your media interview success***

DO's	DON'Ts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Prepare &amp; Practice</li> <li>✓ Keep messages simple</li> <li>✓ Try to deliver them early in the interview</li> <li>✓ Be ready to tell/illustrate your story</li> <li>✓ Stick to what you know</li> <li>✓ Correct misinformation</li> <li>✓ Use everyday language</li> <li>✓ Act like everything is on the record</li> <li>✓ Try to be natural /conversational rather than scripted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ “Wing it”</li> <li>❖ Deviate from key messages</li> <li>❖ Let reporter put words in your mouth</li> <li>❖ Say “no comment”</li> <li>❖ Repeat a negative phrase</li> <li>❖ Feel pressured to answer a question if you don't know the answer</li> <li>❖ Take anything personal</li> </ul>

**MANAGING MEDIA ON EVENT DAY / INTERVIEW DAY**

On the event day (if you are running one), local TV cameras or newspaper reporters/photographers may show up at your location to film the excitement. If possible, try and find out which local media are planning to attend in advance. This may not always be possible, so if media show up unexpected, don't be caught off guard...this is a GOOD thing!

Bring several copies (5-10 copies) of your media advisory or media release and any other related materials for the media to take away. This will ensure the info they have to produce their story is accurate. Always include contact info in case they need to follow-up.

If it is an interview at your program location, the same tips apply.

**HOW TO MANAGE MEDIA AT YOUR LOCATION**

1. Do your best to greet all media who attend and keep your eyes peeled for any cameras (video or still). That way, you'll be able to identify yourself to the TV crew or the newspaper photographer and manage any interviews or shots.  
\*establish a media sign in desk or station or notify the people at registration to call you when media arrive. Best to include this in your advisory.
2. Ask the reporter what type of shot they are looking for and offer to set-up an area for them. They will always tell you what they need. Don't push for your own preference.
3. If the reporter would like to do an interview, ask them who they would like to speak to and what type of questions they plan to ask. Try to coordinate as quickly as possible.

4. Create a media sheet to collect names and contact information. Get the reporter/photographer name and contact information and ask them if they know when the coverage will run. Share this information with Decoda when and if you can so we can help monitor the coverage.

## PR/MEDIA RELATIONS TIMELINE

The following is a sample timeline template you can use for developing your media list, sending out your media advisory and following up with media.

Generally you want to have your media plan in place two months out. If you are trying to get interviews start sending info three to four weeks out. For the day-of coverage, send them the advisory 10 days out and the five days out and then morning of.

If you have confirmation they will be sending someone, you don't need to send follow up advisories, but do confirm two-three days prior with a phone call.

*Below is a sample only.*

Date	Deliverable	Responsibility
Sept 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create media list</li> </ul>	
Sept 8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Send Advisory</li> </ul>	
Sept 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Follow-up on advisory</li> </ul>	
Sept 15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop media day release</li> </ul>	
Sept 18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop media kits</li> </ul>	
Sept 19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Media Day</li> </ul>	
Etc...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>	

## TEN TIPS ON WRITING A PRESS RELEASE:

**1. It did not go through an editor/fact-checker.** You've all heard the stories about the company that sends out a press release encouraging consumers to call a 1-800 number. One incorrect digit and you could be flooded with calls from people looking for a product or service other than yours ... sometimes a little more embarrassing. I will leave it at that. **FACT CHECK EVERYTHING!**

**2. It doesn't contain news.** That your CEO got an award is not news—not unless the award was for a revolutionary medical device that saves people's lives or software that reduces waiting times at hospital ERs. When you're writing a press release, always ask: Why should the publication's readers care about this product/service/milestone? What value does it provide to readers? What problem does it solve? If you don't have an answer, then it's not newsworthy.

**3. It's salesy.** Press releases are not sales letters. They're not ad copy. So take out the "you," "we," and "us." Don't use overly hyped words such as "miracle," "breakthrough," and "cure." Refrain from peppering it with flowery adjectives to describe your service. Just stick to the facts. You can—and should—accommodate opinions by adding quotes, but don't let them leak into the narrative. A press release should be formatted like an article. If you're not familiar with that format, check out the publication you're targeting and copy theirs.

**4. It doesn't have a story.** You might have something worth reporting, but if it's all facts and figures, your readers won't see it. Their eyes will already have glazed over. Always tell a story. Complement facts with quotes that express insight or convey an emotional reaction to the data. Frame your release around a challenge that was or can be overcome, a problem that was or can be solved. That's how you portray your company as a hero—by showing, through storytelling, how it has helped or can help others, and not by indulging in self-praise.

**5. It lacks focus.** I get it. You're doing all these awesome things. Heck, you're changing the world. But focus on just one thing. One project. One product. One campaign. Save the others for separate releases. You can talk about them if they're related and build on each other, but only one can be the star. Having multiple angles will run you into all sorts of problems. Not only will your press release be too long and your headline incomprehensible—which will confuse and annoy editors—they also won't be search-friendly. Search engines see content that's about too many things as content that's about nothing.

**6. It buries the lead.** If you don't state your point in the first paragraph, editors will toss out your pitch before getting to the second. But like me, you sometimes might want to lead with an anecdote. That's OK, as long as it's related to the point of the release. It should also be interesting enough to make readers want to know what happens next. It should flow smoothly to the second paragraph, where the big reveal takes place. And it should be short. If your release is about an anti-stroke campaign, you should hit the campaign after three or four sentences.

**7. It doesn't have a news-like headline.** A headline can make or break a release. Advertising executive David Ogilvy once said that on average, five times as many people read the headline as they do the body copy. So if you don't sell something in your headline, you've

wasted 80 percent of your money. It's the same with a press release that you're selling to reporters. A news-like headline communicates direct benefits that are relevant to your target audience. It's not cryptic, promotional, or overly clever.

**8. It's too long.** Stick to a single page, no more than 400 words. Begin with an anecdote or a reference to a high-profile issue or event; immediately connect it with the product, service, or cause you wish to publicize; put in a paragraph with statistics from reputable sources for credibility and context; energize it with a quote or two; and then end with some boilerplate text about your company. That's it. Length should not be a problem if you avoid mistake No. 4.

**9. It doesn't have any quotes.** Quotes make opinion, insight, and emotion possible in a press release. They take readers beyond the traditional five Ws (who, what, where, when, and why) to the hows. To answer questions like, "How do employees feel about the change in overtime policy?" Or, "How can you explain that concept using a metaphor or analogy?" Emotion is at the core of storytelling. Avoid quotes that simply state facts and figures, because they're a waste of space. Also, don't use quotes that blatantly promote your product, unless they're from impartial sources.

**10. It's riddled with jargon.** Don't write "myocardial infarction" if you can write "heart attack." Don't write "remunerate" when "pay" works just as well. Unless you're writing to colleagues (and sometimes even if you are), jargon makes you sound pompous and difficult to relate to. It also forces reporters to look up certain terms (in which case they might just say, forget it). It's also not search-friendly, because search engines favor natural language.