

Advocating Why Courts Matter Through the Media

Media advocacy is the strategic use of the media to bring about change. We know that the media is an existing infrastructure already reaching our target audience, whether our audience is the general public or a specific group or even one person. In order to strategically use the media for advocacy work, we must share our knowledge and stories with members of the media. To do this, we use a variety of tools played during crucial newsworthy times. These tools include letters to the editor, op-eds, press releases, press events, etc. When we convince members of the media to cover our issues, they expose our knowledge and stories to a mass audience. Through this coverage, we can begin to influence public opinion and bring about change.

A subset of media advocacy is **social media**. We no longer need to wait for a professional reporter to take interest in our message in order to have an impact. We can now influence the discussion and be our own message amplifiers through social media. Studies have shown that people trust those closest to them for information, more so than traditional media. Through Facebook and Twitter, we can take arguments published elsewhere online and encourage our friends and family to share those on social media. This means we can use social media to get people closest to us talking with each other about important issues and begin to have an impact that way.

In addition, developing a respected profile on Facebook and Twitter allows you to engage in the conversation with experts on the issue, reporters, bloggers, members of Congress, the president, White House staffers, editorial boards, celebrities, etc. Social media can also help you conduct research and stay on top of the news.

Building Relationships with Reporters

Who to contact:

First, you must identify the news outlets that reach your target audience.

- While mainstream media outlets are usually a good bet, don't forget publications that have a smaller demographic such as media outlets for minorities, for parents, for youth, etc. This can take some time to research, but making sure you identify the correct media outlets can save you time in the long run by targeting media that will actually be interested in what you are pitching.
- Don't forget blogs and other Internet-based publications. Some publications only exist online or in the Twittersphere!

Second, knowing whom you should contact at these media outlets is key.

- For print media outlets (including online news sites and blogs), try to track down reporters or bloggers who cover a "beat" that encompasses your issue area. A "beat" is a subject area assigned to a specific reporter. Sample local beats include the local school

board, state legislature or “statehouse,” local politics, crime, entertainment and music, metro or city desk, health, religion, etc. At the national level, reporters cover beats such as Congress, justice, education, immigration and the White House. If you can’t find a reporter who covers your issue area, you may reach out to an editor, usually a senior editor or the managing editor. Don’t reach out to the editor-in-chief or the publisher; they usually are not handling the day-to-day editorial operations of the publications.

- For a specific TV or radio show, getting your information into the hands of the producer is the best way to go. The producer is responsible for packaging a show – and usually determines who the guests will be and what stories will be covered.

To be included in a general news segment on a TV station or radio show, look for a reporter who covers the correct beat. If you can’t locate the correct reporter, contact a producer. You should also send your information to the general tips line, which is usually located on the station’s website.

How to contact:

Large media and press shops use comprehensive databases to search for the correct contacts. But you can track down the right reporter, producer, editor or blogger by:

- Internet searches
- Calling the editorial department and asking.

Once you have gathered the contact information for reporters, make a spreadsheet or list that includes the contact’s name, media outlet, email, phone number and any notes. For example, if you recently read a story by the reporter on the judicial nominations issue, make sure to include that in the notes section. Or if you know the publication is only put out once a week, make a note of the day it is published. This type of information will come in handy as you try to build long-term relationships with members of the media.

When to contact:

Whether you are sending out a press release, planning a press conference or calling up a reporter:

- **Always reach out first thing in the morning,** if possible. Reporters and producers are busy people. As they get closer to their deadline in the evening, they don’t have as much time to hear new ideas.
- **Give advanced notice.** A reporter or producer may be interested in covering your issue, but if s/he is juggling two or three stories at once, s/he may not have time to give it the attention it needs. If the reporter or producer knows in advance, s/he can plan ahead, or can share your idea with an editor to assign.

Begin a relationship:

Good journalists are always looking for reliable sources. They are relying on these sources to

help them break important news or tell a story that hasn't already been told. Bottom line: they need you as much as you need them.

Once you've tracked down a media outlet you want to cover your issue and the correct reporter or producer to cover it, it's time to introduce yourself and your organization, either by phone or email. Here are some tips:

- When you make the initial contact, try to call for a reason – journalists need to know what's in it for them. It's best to tie an introduction to a pitch.
- Once you have the journalist's ear, try to set up an in-person meeting to get coffee or lunch. If they aren't interested in meeting, let them know you have their name on your contact list and will keep them up-to-date on any news. And let the journalist know they can call on you anytime; make sure they have your name and contact information.

What to pitch:

Whether you are calling up a member the media with a news tip, sending a press release, submitting an op-ed, or meeting a reporter for coffee, you should be conveying information that is newsworthy, or something that the editor, reporter or producer would feel is fresh, new and of interest to the public. Some things members of the media may take into consideration when determining if something is newsworthy are:

- Is it timely? This means it has to be happening in the present or near future. Old news doesn't sell.
- Has the issue been covered before? If so, is there a new angle?
- For a regional or community media outlet, is it local and relevant?
- For a national outlet, is it of national interest? Often times, national reporters look for "trend" stories; if they have three or more examples from across the country, it can become a national story.
- Is there a conflict or controversy?
- Is there a good human interest story? Do you have an impacted person who can be featured?

It's important to realize that it may take several tries before your press release, e-mail or phone call gets noticed by a reporter or receives a response. Don't get discouraged and be persistent.

How to pitch:

A pitch can be a phone call, an email, or a short e-mail message to the reporter with a press release or op-ed submission pasted in the body of the email below. Pitches should:

- Be short and to the point – around three to five short paragraphs, tops.
- Include source information so the reporter or producer can do his or her own research.

- Tell the reporter or producer the reason s/he was targeted. For example, let the reporter know you liked her coverage of a certain issue or you know he covered a certain beat. Try to make a connection.

If you are pitching by phone, it may be helpful to write out your pitch ahead of time and stick to the script, until the reporter asks questions. Make it conversational and friendly. If you send a pitch by e-mail, be sure the subject heading is to-the-point and conveys your message. Also, include links to information on the Internet where the reporter can get further information, for example, link to official documents, court cases or news stories.