

Media Management for Synergy Groups

The core of synergy is communication!

Whether you are community-only or include industry and government, sharing information is the foundation of what you do as a synergy group. You start by gathering and sharing info with each other, and before long you find yourself wanting to tell others what you've found out, what you're doing, and what's coming up!

That means you're going to be talking to and through the media (newspapers, radio, TV); developing informational materials (reports, posters, brochures, newsletters); talking to individuals and groups; and organizing public meetings and open houses. This takes time, energy, and money—so you need to be sure of what you are doing. Not only that, if you manage to get incorrect or incomplete information “out there”, it will take even more time, energy, and money to make it right, and may end up doing serious damage to your group...

Let's start with your personal communication skills...

Fear of public speaking is the number one fear of adults, world-wide. Your turmoil results from a primitive physiological survival response, the “fight or flight” reaction. Your body doesn't know or care whether you are actually safe. It just knows that you are uncomfortable—perhaps even terrified—and so it does everything it can to lighten the load and get you out of there. Your heart speeds up to get blood to your arms and legs—and away from your brain!

When we add a microphone or camera into the mix, very few are able to accomplish effective communication. Tongues get tangled, thoughts flee, and brains bumble.

Transform Anxiety into Energy

- Prepare. Understand your topic. Anticipate questions.
- Be certain you **really** know the first thing and the last thing you want to say, so you start and end with impact.
- Stop thinking about yourself and focus on your audience and message.
- Believe you can do it! What we think about most is what generally comes to pass. Focus on the positive, not the negative!
- **Know that audiences (even the media!) want you to succeed.** When *you* are in the audience, you more often find yourself hoping the speaker will be good than hoping for dismal failure, right?
- **Be positive about what you are saying.** Upbeat is more effective than negative.
- **Face-to-face communication is about 10% content, 40% tone, 50% body language.**
- **Relax.** Don't forget to breathe!

You're On!

- What's the **message** you intend to leave your audience with?
- **Why** are you telling them this?
- What are your **main points**?
- Is there anything you **must not say**?
- **Speak normally.**
- **Intend to be heard.**
- **Breathe** from the diaphragm.
- With or without a **microphone**, ask if they can hear you; correct if necessary
- **Raise your chin.**
- Make **eye contact.**
- Use a **lower, comfortable-sounding pitch**—you'll come across as more authoritative and intelligent.

Sounding Calm and in Control

- Start **when you are ready.**
- **Smile.**
- If you need to **start over**, do it.
- **Make your points** clearly and assertively. Avoid *I guess, I think, maybe, sort of*—anything that indicates uncertainty or lack of information.
- Avoid **filler sounds.**
- **Speak normally.**
- **Pause** if you need to. The time is not *nearly* as long as you think.
- **Don't show nervousness** or weakness.
- Lost your place? Acknowledge it, find it, and **keep on.**
- **Don't apologize.**
- You just got asked a **question**, and you don't know the answer. Admit it, say you'll get back to them, and do it, or refer them to a source; better yet—anticipate and prepare.
- *You* determine **what your audience sees and hears.**
- How you stand, speak, gesture, and interact with your audience is under **your** control.
- **Keep your perspective!**

Now let's talk about dealing with the media

Expect to create media interest as you become a well-organized, proactive synergy group! You are dealing with issues that affect everyone, so what you do and say will be of interest to others. You will want to use the media to convey your message, report your activities, and encourage others to join you.

Media professionals communicate for a living (some better than others). Your best chance of getting your intended information into the public eye is to learn how to interact effectively with reporters. Bad news and strife generally sell better than feel-good stories, so don't be surprised when a reporter seems to be looking for the negative. Your best bet? Be really well-prepared!

Media Rules

- 1. You aren't in control.** You have absolutely no control over the use or placement of a news item you submit to the media. You can do everything right and still end up with the media doing an unsatisfactory job on your story.
- 2. Your needs don't carry any weight.** Don't even think about insisting your "important" news item be used—nothing turns a reporter or editor off faster than a demand for special treatment.
- 3. You need to explain and explain some more.** The reporter covering your story may not know much about your event. Remember, you're the expert. Consider brief written background info.
- 4. There are no previews.** The media won't let you see, edit, correct, or otherwise preview a story before it is printed or aired. Don't antagonize them by asking, and don't threaten to not cooperate or to withhold information unless you have the right to approve what is used.
- 5. More isn't better.** Don't send duplicate copies of your news release to different people at a media organization. This can cause embarrassment—if two different reporters get the release and write stories. Make every effort to deal with just one person at each media outlet.
- 6. There's always another source.** If you won't talk, you can bet the reporter will find somebody who will. And it could be somebody who doesn't know the whole story.
- 7. Off the record? DOES NOT EXIST!** Respond as if everything you say will be reported, including any informal conversations. *If you don't want to see it in print or hear it on the air, don't say it!*
- 8. Truth or consequences!** Always tell the truth! You can skirt a sensitive question, but don't lie—it will inevitably come back to haunt you. And be very careful with "preliminary" info.
- 9. Create sound bites.** Develop a list of the key points you want to make, in 10- to 20-second sound bites, to focus your message on what's really important. Do NOT indulge in vague or "motherhood and apple pie" statements.
- 10. They really screwed it up!** Don't lose your cool if the media make an error in your story. If it's not really significant, forget it. If it is, politely point it out to the reporter and request a correction. If you aren't satisfied with the response, talk to the reporter's editor or news director. And if that doesn't work, be satisfied with pointing out the error in a letter to the editor or station manager. Don't forget that if you overreact, you could damage your relationship with the media outlet permanently—and that this probably isn't the last story they'll do on you, but may be the last positive one.

Working with Reporters

When you find yourself facing a camera and microphone or a phone call from a print journalist on deadline, take the opportunity to reach a vast audience with your own words and images.

- **Look at the question as a jumping-off point**, not as a set of limiting parameters. Use the question to get *your* information out.
- **Don't use jargon.** Communicate in language your audience will understand.
- **Expand acronyms.**
- **Don't say "no comment."** The implication is that you have something to hide. Explain truthfully why you can't respond and then offer other useful information.
- **Be careful how you use numbers.** Be very accurate, relate the numbers to something real, and explain them. *Get them right—people remember the first numbers they hear.*
- **Be relentlessly and assertively positive—not defensive.**
- **Tell anecdotes—short ones!** Illustrate your point with a very brief story that helps the listener visualize and empathize with your position.

Preparing for a Media Encounter

- Have your brief, accurate handout press kit ready in advance *every single time*—containing the history of your organization and the event, dates, locations, important phone numbers, and a list of positive things your organization has done in the recent past.
- Prepare written “sound bites”—short, quotable passages to hand out. This helps avoid having your quote altered or paraphrased.
- Put "The most important thing is . . ." in front of the point that you most want to get across—reporters often look for that phrase.
- Practice, practice, practice—role play answering questions, dealing with hecklers.
- Use humour **ONLY IF YOU ARE GOOD AT IT**—bad jokes are worse than none.
- Ask to think about a very difficult question for a minute. Being well prepared is a better alternative...
- Emphasize the positive side of what you do.
- Plan ahead. Have your message points on index cards so you can gently keep control of the interview.
- Utilize one consistent spokesperson for your organization, if you can.
- **NEVER** talk “off the record”, even if you think you know the reporter. **Don't say anything you don't want to see in print or hear on the air.**
- Do not ask to see the story before it goes to press—reporters hardly ever let the source control the story. However, before the reporters leave, you can say "Let's review my quotes to make sure they're correct." This will give you a clue as to what the reporter selected and the angle the reporter has chosen (good, bad, or indifferent).

Making the Media Love You

- Go to the news media—don't wait for them to come looking for you.
 - Identify at least three news operations you plan to work with.
 - Introduce yourself and your organization.
 - Find out if there is a specific contact person.
- Be aware of lead times.
 - How long in advance do they need to know about your event?
 - What are their ongoing deadlines?
 - Call when you are beginning your planning.
- Send (by fax or email, if possible) your announcement(s) to appropriate news media.
 - Determine the size of your audience (local, regional, provincial, national).
 - For electronic mail, find out what format they need from you (MSWord, etc.)
- Don't send out your news release and forget about it.
 - Follow up quickly—within a day—to make sure the announcement was received.
- Don't call an editor or reporter when they are on a deadline—contact them *before*.
 - When you call, ask if they have time to talk.
- Make yourself available for a reporter's calls.
- Tell the news media why your release is important to their readers and viewers.
- For photo opportunities: lots of lead time, accurate dates, times, locations, and directions.
- Be prepared to answer questions, and be friendly, fair, and approachable.
- Have a contact list—spokes-people available to make statements on specific questions.

Media Releases

- Use judgement when sending out media releases. Send them regularly, but bombarding people unnecessarily will put them off. If you've missed the deadline, don't even bother.
- Mark NEWS RELEASE at the top—plus correct names, phone numbers, and your logo.
- Next: date of issue and "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE" unless it is embargoed—if it is, add a note at the top telling journalists not to leak or print the story before a particular deadline.
- Use a snappy headline or your standard intro.
- First paragraph MUST tell WHAT is happening, WHERE, WHY, WHEN, and by WHOM.
- Use factual, well-written **plain language**, short paragraphs, simple sentences, on one page.
- Write ENDS at the foot of the media release.
- Follow the media release up with one phone call to make sure that it was received.

Last, let's look at organizing a public meeting or open house

You may want to hold a public meeting or open house to form a synergy group, get public input, showcase an event, host a speaker, or present information, findings, or a report. The purpose will affect planning. It helps to build a relationship with participants and media in advance.

Pre-Event Checklist

- **Why are you holding this event?** Have a purpose and a target audience.
- **Find out speaker/presenter/facilitator availability**, if using.
- **Select a location**, based on geographic convenience for participants, size of facility, features, and suitability (check out libraries, community centres, local halls, government facilities, schools, etc. for availability, sometimes even available free).
- If you are unfamiliar with the location, go see it with the following list in hand:
 - Is the facility dark, dirty, or in poor repair?
 - Is the room large enough?
 - Is there enough seating, and tables (if required)?
 - Are there enough electrical outlets?
 - Is there adequate parking? Accessibility for the handicapped?
 - Is it in an appropriate location for the audience you hope to attract?
 - How is the sound (acoustics, coolers, generators, fans, etc.)?
 - If the event includes food, is there a kitchen you or your caterer can use? Do you need to bring your own plates, cutlery, coffee makers, etc.?
 - Is there a fee; does it include clean-up? If not, what is your group required to do?
 - How will you gain access; will you need to pick up a key?
 - Do you need to bring drinking water?
 - Are you required to use in-house catering, equipment, etc.?
- **Check conflicts** with major sporting events or community gatherings, and avoid holiday periods and other major annual events such as start of school, graduation, etc.
- **Select a date**, checking availability of location and other services, such as catering.
- **Book location, services, speakers/facilitator**, and required video, equipment, etc.
- **Complete any required applications or acquire necessary permits** well in advance.
- **Publicize the event**, using some or all of the following:
 - Posters and fliers.
 - Email messages or fliers to each person on your sign-up sheets and mailing list.
 - Public service announcements on local radio or TV stations (note deadlines).
 - A listing in the "event" or "calendar" section of local newspapers.
 - Word-of-mouth.
- **Invite the media**, telling the purpose, date, time, and place of the event, and provide an information package and/or article. **Find out and observe their deadlines!**
- **Ensure all helpers know what to do** (notes, photocopying, program, ballots, etc.)

Conducting the Event

- A few days before the event, confirm all your bookings (speakers, location, services, equipment) and **send a reminder to any media you have invited**.
- On the day of event, arrive at least an hour early to ensure chairs and tables are set up, equipment is in order, and promotional materials and displays are set up.
- Ensure any required minute takers, etc. are in place and ready to go.
- Let people know the event will be recorded, minutes taken, etc. if this is the case.
- Have a process for acquiring permission for the use of photographs, videos, etc. (FOIPP).
- As people arrive, greet them at the door, and have a sign-in sheet to track who comes.
- Assign somebody to “host” any media people, ensuring they have all necessary info.
- Provide an agenda and any required handouts.
- Set up a process for questions, if part of the event, and determine who will facilitate.
- Introduce process, timing, sequence of events, ground rules, and speakers/facilitators.
- If media are present, welcome them. This also lets participants know the media are there.
- Thank speakers.
- At the end, make sure to let participants know the next step(s)—joining up, attending future meetings, writing a letter, making a call, etc. and ensure media has this info, too.
- Thank people for attending, ask if they have put their names on the sign-in sheets, and tell them you will use the lists for contacting them in future.
- Make sure participants have the organization’s contact information (cards, brochures, annual reports, etc.)
- End on an up-beat note.
- Keep any flip charts, lists, FOIPP permissions, etc. for creating reports, filing, etc.

Things to watch for during the event:

- Do not allow overly outspoken people to dominate the discussion.
- Ensure participants do not degrade or insult others.
- Step in if threats, inappropriate accusations, or personal attacks are made.
- Keep the discussion on track, remembering the purpose of the event.
- Have a process for questions, and be prepared to courteously enforce it.
- Respect agreements about time.
- Follow the agenda, maintain order and structure.
- Be prepared to cut the event short, to resume at a later date, if it becomes too contentious (and if this outcome is anticipated, have a neutral facilitator in place to conduct the event).
- If the media has asked to interview participants, arrange for this to happen, in a quiet area after any presentation is finished.