



Faith and the Media

A Basic Guide to Media Relations for Faith and Inter Faith Groups in the East of England

Faith and inter faith groups are flourishing in this region, and contributing to its life and well being in a number of ways, but their messages are not always reaching as far as they could.

In response to requests from groups who want to reach as wide an audience as possible for events, seminars, worship and community news, as well as those who are seeking to develop a more positive relationship with the media – we have produced this short guide for faith and inter faith groups in the hope that it will help you to get your message across and develop positive relationships with your local media.

It covers the basics of press releases, interviews, and dealing with issues and crises. In addition, the EEFC and the communications directors of Anglican and Roman Catholic Dioceses in the region, who have a wealth of expertise, are willing to assist faith or inter faith groups who need to discuss an opportunity or issue with the media. Contact details are at the end of this document.

The document is split into sections – you can either jump directly to the section that is most relevant for your needs, or use the guide as a whole:

A. Press Releases	p 2-3
B. Other ways of communicating with the media	p 4
C. Issues and Crises	p 5
D. Media Interviews	p 6
E. Resources	p 7

A. Press Releases

Purpose

The purpose of a press release is to convey information to the media, so that once it is published, there will be a result.

This can be as simple as:

Information: we are holding an open day at our premises

Short Term Result: people will find this out, visit, understand more about the project

Long Term Result: people may use or support the project

Desired results may be changes in knowledge or understanding: even if people don't visit, they will be more aware and supportive of what you are doing as a result of reading about it.

A good press release is one that contains clear information and a considered message – but primarily a good press release is one that **gets used**.

Editors receive enormous numbers of press releases. Yours must be:

- Clear and easy to use
- Interesting
- Relevant
- In context

Editors and programme planners look for:

Clarity

An old but true saying is that the first paragraph must contain the five Ws: what, when, who, why and where. After making sure the vital facts are there, you can develop your 'mini story' logically to expand on the information.

Don't use jargon, and if you must use acronyms, explain them in full on first usage.

Interest

You must have something to say! Look for a news 'hook' such as, seeking/winning more funding, a special event, an anniversary. Don't be modest with your information – if you are announcing you have won an award, then say so. That's news! But don't make claims or promises you're not certain of. You can say, "As a result of our work, 50 people have been trained in IT skills and improved their job prospects" but not "All the kids at our Saturday football group will probably be snapped up by Real Madrid". Focus on people wherever possible, and especially if they are well known.

Relevant

Send your press release to the newspapers and programmes whose readers/listeners will be interested in what you have to say. Start by choosing the publications on a geographical basis, then consider other interest groups e.g. businesses might like to know that you recycle computers. Then think laterally – so would the environment media. You may need to adapt your first paragraph to make clear the relevance for the publication you are targeting.

Context

Your information may not stand alone, and can gain topical relevance if you refer to changes in local need and how you are meeting them; or to national social or economic trends, (do check the facts first). If your project has involved sponsors or other organisations, you'll need to work jointly with them.

Useful Tips

- Email etiquette – don't send releases as attachments, but embed them; and don't send large files (e.g. ones that are heavy with graphics and photos)
- Put in quotes to liven the text (make sure the person you're quoting has given his/her approval)
- Put in clear contact details – it's best to give more than one name, and make sure the named person is going to be around
- Be ready to react to press enquiries by giving interviews or further information
- News releases should be a maximum of 2 x A4 pages, one page is better. Any detailed information e.g. background to project, details of funding arrangements should be included as separate pages, under editor's notes.
- Give your releases a consistent look to help your organisation to be recognised
- Don't chase up on releases just to ask if they're going to be used. Find a reason to make further contact, for example offer a specific invitation, or give a named journalist an exclusive offer of some information
- Don't attach photos, but make clear what is available, and have it ready to send as a jpeg

B Other ways of communicating with the media

Features

Local and specialist press often offer opportunities for longer feature articles, where there is more chance to give background information. Topics for these could include the story of a place of worship, the profile of someone who has played a key role, or background to a controversial issue.

- Find out who the feature editor is and talk through your ideas with them
- Establish whether you will need to write the article or if they will send a reporter
- Find out who else they might interview on the subject
- Offer good quality, relevant photographic material or be prepared to allow a photographer on site.

Responding to the media

Whenever there is a major news story - good or bad - rest assured the media will always find out, sometimes before you! This type of news could include an incident at your premises, loss or gain of funding, planning problems, etc. Try to establish in advance who should handle media enquiries as a journalist will call any number you print or have on your web site

- Meet all situations head-on - 'no comment' will leave the media, your own members and others to draw their own conclusions – which may well be worse than the truth
- Follow up a verbal interview with a written statement to reinforce your main points, and act as a record
- Only release information that is known and verified
- Always respond to media enquiries but in your own time (but meeting their deadline) in order to give you a chance to ascertain the facts and possibly discuss with your team
- Channel all enquiries on a particular subject to one named contact to ensure consistency of message
- Look for the good news (with appropriate sensitivity): loss of funding may appear to be a 'bad' story but you could also talk about the interest you have from other sponsors and the good work you do
- Use the opportunity to build a relationship with the journalist: even if dealing with a very difficult story, being truthful, prompt and co-operative will put you in a good light and be helpful with future issues. Remember that publications can become enthusiastic for particular causes - nurture this where you can.

Position statements

Sometimes the same questions may be asked regularly by the media, on a subject that although not newsworthy, is of interest locally. Have a statement of details and background information prepared so this can be sent promptly to the journalist. Topics might include 'Do you run children's clubs over the school holidays', or 'How is all the work you've been doing locally benefitting the community?'

Enquiries could be more contentious or have national implications: position statements should be drawn up in conjunction with e.g. your national faith body, or Diocese Media Officer. Enquiries could for example be about policy on use of premises or on how beneficiaries for a project are chosen.

Photo caption

The story is the photo e.g. children taking part in a sports event. A longer than usual caption replaces the release. Send information to the picture editor of the publication.

C Issues and Crises

Ongoing issues, which may be internal or external, are matters that could have a significant effect on the functioning, credibility or future interests of your group. Issues that impact on an organisation should be identified early and managed so that they don't develop into crises.

Identify issues: keep an eye on the media (local and national) and on information being put out by bodies you work with (for example Local Authorities, sponsors, your national faith body).

Consider impacts: how will an issue affect your operation? Will external changes and opinion have a fundamental effect on your group or project? Should you have a position? What will happen in both PR and operational terms if you do nothing?

How 'mature' is the issue: have you identified it at an 'emerging' stage where it can be influenced or is it already having a real impact?

You need to make sure you have all the facts as far as possible, verify them, and then decide whether to remain reactive or be proactive. At the least, you should prepare an agreed statement ready for use, and think through what the media would be likely to ask and how you would respond. It is essential to watch how the issue develops and consult with others as necessary.

Crises can cause decisive change in or for an organisation. Some crises cannot be avoided, some are the result of ignoring an issue, others arise from poor management.

Typically, the crisis itself will be short lived with a longer fall out phase, where PR and good management will minimise the impacts. Once it is resolved, you should review what has happened.

Whose crisis is it?: what may appear to be your problem, is not always your PR crisis – it may be someone else who needs to deal with the media (e.g. the Police, your Local Authority).

Analyse the degree of crisis:

- will the situation escalate if left unmanaged?
- will it result in unwanted outside attention?
- will it interfere with day-to day activity?
- will it adversely impact on your reputation?
- how can you recover from the damage?

Isolate the crisis: If your group is large enough, try to nominate a small team to manage the crisis until it is over. This team should handle the media. They will need to:

- Clarify who can speak on behalf of the organisation – only these people should handle communications.
- Consider who needs to be kept informed of developments directly e.g. advisers, other employees, volunteers
- Control the messages – this is your chance to put your side of the story and to shape perceptions of what is happening
- Respond to media and other enquiries immediately, accurately and appropriately
- Keep up to date with media comment
- Ensure they have the facts
- Have some material prepared 'ready to go': facts about the work you do, photos of key personnel, background information on your faith group or project
- Keep detailed notes of decisions and actions

Learn from others: take an interest in the crises of others and how they have been handled. Were the organisations credible, did they take control, did they have people 'on side', was their crisis one from which you could fall victim (often the answer is yes e.g. criminal activity by a member of staff, financial problems, fire). What did that organisation do – should you follow their model?

D Media Interviews

Interviews may result from a press release you have issued, or from an external incident. Key points to remember are:

- Ask the journalist what type of information they are after, who else is being interviewed on the topic, what their deadline is.
- For broadcast media, establish if the interview is live or pre-recorded.
- Know your story and messages (never more than 3) you want to get over; check your facts and figures
- If a journalist requests an interview on the back of a press release you have generated, always find someone who can respond.
- If a time/place requested for the interview isn't convenient, suggest alternatives.
- Always meet journalist deadlines - if there's a good reason why you can't meet this deadline say why (e.g. the information won't be verified for another two days).
- Only say what you want to say - don't be tempted to fill silences left by the journalist, or be side-tracked onto other issues (remember your key messages).
- Don't use jargon or acronyms, talk to the viewer/reader and not the interviewer
- Always respond to enquiries, even if you have to be a little bland or non-committal. Do explain to the journalist why you have to take this stance e.g. 'We are still trying to ascertain the full facts', Follow this up with a confirmation email
- Whatever the questions, make sure you get your story across. Try these phrases:
 - 'The key point to make is...'
 - 'To return to the main issue...'
- Back up your responses with 'real life' examples or research findings. Rather than 'We're helping numerous vulnerable people', say 'Our efforts do pay off – for example, last week one of the people we have been training got a job in a computer company, and is starting a new career'
- If an interviewer makes a statement that is wrong, correct them and spell out the correct information
- Find out when the interview will be printed/broadcast. Keep cuttings - these will let you know not only how much coverage was obtained, but also the quality, how the story is developing, and how you could learn to get your messages over better in the future
- If the final published/broadcast story contains inaccuracies, let the journalist know. Take a view on whether you need a retraction, apology etc.

In the end, the point of media coverage is to get your messages across and help you achieve a desired result. The starting point for every media strategy should be a set of key messages that will be used as a basis for:

- more specific messages for pro-active media engagement
- rapid responses to re-active media engagement
- the briefing of spokespeople

The key messages also help an organisation to position itself with the media – so yours should flow from and be consistent with the aims, principles and policy position of your organisation. Policy should never be driven by the desire to get headlines or coverage for its own sake.

E Resources

As a communicator, you are an important resource for your organisation: you can be a useful 'reality check' for it, and can help it move from where it is now to where you wish to be, in consultation with your colleagues.

The following may be useful:

global tolerance is a communications trainer for charities, NGO's and other organisations with positive social stories. Some of the areas they cover are: press release writing; crisis management; events to attract the media; broadcast interview skills; communications and ethics; religion and the media:

www.globaltolerance.com/

Media Trust has a wide range of resources and training to get your voice heard:

www.mediatrust.org/

The Church of England website has a useful section on 'working with the media' :

www.cofe.anglican.org/news/

The following people in our region are willing to offer advice:

Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich

Nick Clarke, Diocesan Communications Director

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Diocese of Chelmsford

Ralph Meloy, Communications Director

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Diocese of Ely

Owen Spencer-Thomas, Press and media relations

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Diocese of Peterborough

Revd Derek Williams, Bishop's Administrator and Press Officer

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Mr Arjian Kataria, Diocesan Communications Officer

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Diocese of Norwich

Jan McFarlane, Diocesan Communications Director

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Roman Catholic Diocese of East Anglia

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