

HOW TO Hold a Press Conference



PRESS CONFERENCE

A press conference is a voluntary presentation of information to the media. In a press conference, you decide what information is presented, how it is presented and who presents it. It is an opportunity to get your story on TV, radio or in the paper.

To hold a press conference, you contact the media, pick a time and a place, make a presentation and respond to reporters' questions.

Members of the Northern Plains Resource Council came from five counties to Billings, Montana, for a "Stake-A-Claim" Rally to dramatize the need for reform of the 1872 Mining Law. That law allows mining companies to claim public lands for as little as \$2.50 per acre. Citizens staked their own "claims" to a piece of popular recreation land before an important vote in Congress on reform. The media were invited to a press conference at the rally and the reform message hit the major papers, TV, and radio in the state.

In Douglas, Wyoming, the Powder River Basin Resource Council organized a press conference to deliver a petition to their Congressional delegation. The press conference, held to call for an end to monopolization in the meat packing industry and a return to fair prices for ranchers, led to statewide coverage of Powder River's campaign, creating additional pressure on the federal government to take action.

PREPARING FOR A PRESS CONFERENCE

DEFINE YOUR GOALS

Before you plan a press conference you should be very clear about your goals. This will help you do a better job of planning the press conference.

Some good reasons for holding a press conference:

- to get publicity about your efforts and problems
- to get widespread media coverage
- to send a message to a decision maker about what you want
- to get more people involved in your organization
- to develop the skills of your members
- to show the strength of your group

Whatever your organizational goals are, remember that you have to have something newsworthy to announce, reveal, or talk about at your press conference.



CHECKLIST FOR SETTING UP A PRESS CONFERENCE

- Clearly state a **good reason** for holding a press conference: the news you are going to reveal has not been covered in the press yet, or there is an emergency, or an important new issue.
- Decide what **message** you want to deliver through the media. Outline your demands to a decision maker (someone who has the power to give you what you want). Include information about what people can do to help, and the date, time and place of your next action.
- Work out the **location** of the press conference. Find an appropriate place that is convenient and has the facilities you need. The location of the press conference depends on your needs and the specific circumstances of your situation. Dramatize your position by choosing a good backdrop. If you decide to hold the press conference indoors, be ready to provide technical assistance for reporters, such as phones, microphones, enough light, etc.
- Set the **date and time** of the press conference, taking into account reporters' deadlines. Usually the best days of the week to get news coverage are Tuesday through Thursday. Check to see that there are no competing news events already scheduled at the time of your conference.

PLANNING A PRESS CONFERENCE (continued)

- ❑ **Invite the media.** Send a press conference advisory to appropriate local media outlets at least a week before the press conference. Follow up with a phone call two days before the press conference to make sure everyone received the advisory. Call them the day before to remind them about the event.
- ❑ **Invite guests.** Make phone calls and send written invitations to prospective guests you want to have at the press conference, such as other members of your group, allies, and friendly politicians.

USE PRESS CONFERENCES STRATEGICALLY

Press conferences can be efficient methods to publicize your news, but they must be strategic and well-organized. If you hold a press conference every week, or without solid news for reporters, they will stop coming.

- ❑ Prepare your **spokesperson(s)** to deliver your message. Generally, it's good to have just one or two speakers during an press conference so people don't talk on top of each other, or mix the message. Rehearse with the speaker(s) to make statements brief and clear and usually no longer than ten minutes. The spokesperson should be experienced in the subject and able to respond to questions after the statement. Often reporters want to interview the spokesperson. Let the press know that the speaker is available after the press conference. Prepare your speaker with 30-second answers for radio or TV, and quotable, simple messages for reporters. Help your speaker practice with a video camera or tape recorder.
- ❑ Choose a **moderator** for the press conference. You need a person to control the process and keep reporters on the subject. If someone goes off subject, the moderator can return the focus saying such things as: "That's an interesting point, but we are here today to discuss..."
- ❑ Prepare **background materials**. Reporters and guests may wish to have a copy of written statements or a press release. You can prepare a packet of factsheets, charts or graphs.

- ❑ Practice **roles** with the members of your group. It's important that everyone understands their role in the event. Think about what will happen all the way through the press conference, and how it will look to reporters. The key question to ask is "What if...?" What if reporters ask a non-spokesperson member a question? What if your opponents show up and heckle?
- ❑ Prepare **visual aids**. Charts, big maps, pictures or other props will help get your message across. However, slide shows are difficult for TV, radio, and print reporters to use.

STARTING THE PRESS CONFERENCE

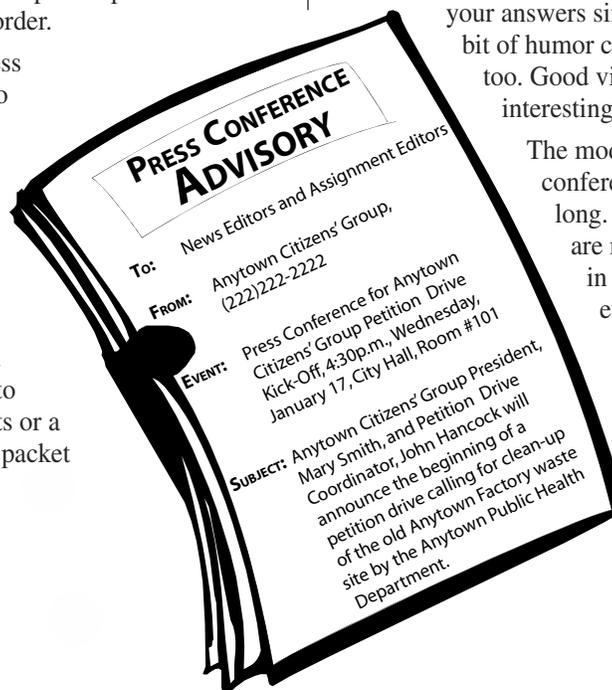
Be ready to welcome TV reporters at least 15 minutes before the beginning of the conference. They usually need time to set up their equipment. Meet everyone at the door and ask them to sign in a guest book you've already prepared (you may need their addresses for the next event). Give them your background material and a copy of the press statement.

Start the press conference as close to on time as possible and certainly not later than ten minutes after the scheduled time, to respect those who came on time.

RUNNING THE PRESS CONFERENCE

The moderator welcomes everyone and briefly introduces the speaker(s). Remember that statements should not be longer than 10-15 minutes. After the speakers are finished, ask for questions. Make your answers simple, brief, and pointed. A little bit of humor can enliven a press conference, too. Good visual aids make your story more interesting, so be creative.

The moderator should end the press conference before things drag out too long. After all the important points are made, the moderator should step in and conclude. Be sure to thank everyone for coming and offer additional information they can get in your office. Thank them for keeping readers, viewers, and listeners informed about this important community issue.



MAKING YOUR STATEMENT

Think through how you can get your message out through the statement and set up of the press conference. You can maximize your impact differently depending on whether you expect **TV**, **radio**, or **print reporters** to come.

TELEVISION: VISUAL IMPACT

Ask: “How can we set up our press conference to give reporters a good picture?”

- Seat speakers close together at the front so they all fit in the picture.
- Seat the audience close to the speakers so they are also in the picture. It’s good to have children and senior citizens on camera.
- Display posters or banners with your group’s name, issue, and demands written on them.
- Bring props (jars of murky water, gas masks).
- Plan to have action during the press conference—movement, lots of people, and signs dramatize your message.

RADIO: AUDIO IMPACT

Ask: “What sounds would be of interest to radio reporters?” “What can we do to make things technically suitable for broadcast?”

- Radio reporters need uncluttered sound with good acoustics and a minimum of background noise.
- Have a designated, well-prepared spokesperson(s) so everyone is not talking at once.
- Have a prepared statement so the main points can be made clearly, but it sounds better if it doesn’t sound like you’re reading it! Practice making a statement from notes.
- Only the designated spokesperson(s) should speak to the media during the news conference.
- Singing or chanting make great sound for radio.
- If you’re holding the news conference at a rally or event with a lot of people and noise, set up a quiet space away from the action for interviews.

PRESS KITS

A press kit is your background material: fact sheets, news release, text of the statement, and visual materials, such as photographs. It can help reporters to create and produce their stories. Hold press kits in folders or envelopes until the end of the news conference to make sure no one leaves early, getting a jump on their competition.

10 STEPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL PRESS CONFERENCE

- Step 1:** Plan ahead. At least two weeks before the event, talk about what you want to do and how you want to do it.
- Step 2:** Tell your group about your ideas; get your members’ ideas and decide on the message you want to get out.
- Step 3:** Prepare props, posters, banners and a press kit.
- Step 4:** Organize a list of reporters you plan to contact about your news conference.
- Step 5:** Write and deliver a news advisory.
- Step 6:** Write the statement you plan to make at the press conference. Keep it short.
- Step 7:** Finalize all details. Write a news release.
- Step 8:** Call reporters to remind them about tomorrow’s conference.
- Step 9:** On the day of the conference, arrive early to situate speakers, organize materials, etc.
- Step 10:** After the conference is over, hand deliver copies of your news release and statements to any reporters who didn’t show up.

PRINT MEDIA: VERBAL IMPACT

Ask: “What would we want if we were newspaper reporters?”

- Provide a press packet with background material, including photos and graphics.
- Pass out copies of press statements.
- Use simple, powerful, quotable lines when speaking.
- Don’t say anything you can’t back up with facts. If something is not a proven fact, but you are sure it is true, preface the statement by saying such things as, “in my opinion” or “we believe. . . .”
- Don’t bring up anything you are not prepared to discuss. If you are asked questions that you don’t want to talk about, say “We’re not here to discuss that matter,” or “Our group has not taken a position on that.”

THE CHECKLIST

News conferences are both fun and serious. Don't spoil the fun: be ready to enjoy the high energy of getting an important story on TV, radio, and in the paper. Prepare yourself as well as you can. Some points to double-check before your news conference:

- Are the date, time, and place convenient for the media and guests?
- How many people do you expect? Do you have enough space to accommodate all the invited people? Did you invite everyone you want there?
- What if not everyone shows up? Do you have a smaller room available so you don't have five people in an auditorium?
- Does your chosen place suit and accommodate the media's equipment needs (TV cameras, electrical outlets, microphones, etc.)? Does it all work? Did you check it? (The easiest way to check it is to ask the members of the media about their needs.)
- Do you plan to make photos for reporters who did not attend your news conference for whatever reason? To make it convenient for the print media, use 8" X 10" prints.
- If your news is the result of a complex study, do you have a brief summary to make it easy to read for nonprofessionals in the subject?
- Are there members of your group in your office whom the media can reach to follow up?
- Did media people who did not come to the news conference receive a news kit?
- After you've checked all of these, check them again. Try to prepare for all possible situations.

FOR MORE ON HOW TO HOLD A PRESS CONFERENCE

Spin Works! A Media Guidebook for Communicating Values and Shaping Opinion, by Robert Bray, SPIN Project, 149 Natoma Street, 3rd Floor, San Francisco, CA 94105; (415) 227-4200; www.spinproject.org.

Media Means, by Barbara Sullivan. Available from the Citizen's Clearinghouse For Hazardous Wastes for \$7.50; PO Box 6806, Falls Church, VA 22040; (703)-237-2249.

World Hunger Year Media Guide, World Hunger Year, 505 Eighth Avenue, 21st Floor, New York, NY 10018; (212)629-8850; 1-800-5-HUNGRY; fax: 212-465-9274; www.worldhungeryear.org.

Getting the Word Out in the Fight to Save the Earth, by Richard Beamish. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2715 North Charles Street, Baltimore, MD 21218-4363; (800)537-5487. ■



WORC is a network of grassroots organizations from seven states that include 9,700 members and 44 local community groups. WORC helps its members succeed by providing training and by coordinating regional issue campaigns.

WORC Member Groups:

Dakota Resource Council
Dakota Rural Action
Idaho Rural Council
Northern Plains Resource Council
Oregon Rural Action
Powder River Basin
Resource Council
Western Colorado Congress

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FOR MORE ON HOLDING A PRESS CONFERENCE:

Principles of Community Organizing training sessions are held twice a year by WORC.

How to Deliver a Message in the Media and **How to Speak in Public** are other topics available in this series of guides to community organizing.

MORE HOW TO GUIDES:

WORC has produced a series of How To's, practical guides to assist members, staff, leaders and citizens to build strong organizations and effective issue campaigns.

Topics are listed on our website – www.worc.org. These publications can be downloaded from the website as PDFs or ordered for \$2 each. Contact WORC regarding bulk orders or about training sessions on topics in this series.

