

How to . . . Hold a Press Conference

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Western Organization of Resource Councils

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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 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 public recreation land before an important vote in Congress on reform. The media was 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, in 1993, 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 meatpacking industry and a

return to fair prices for ranchers, led to statewide coverage of PRBRC's campaign, creating additional pressure on the federal government to take action.

Define your goals

Before you plan a press conference you should be very clear about your goals. Being clear about your goals will help you do a better job of planning the press conference. Some good reasons for holding a press conference might include:

- 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.

Major steps 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. Where you choose to have a 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

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.



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The Ukrainian chapter of Greenpeace held a news conference, dedicated to the 10th Anniversary of the explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, on the steps of the Chernobyl Ministry Palace. At the conference, Greenpeace activists revealed results of a study they recently completed. About 30 media outlets covered the event.

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.

- **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 that 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.

Press Conference Advisory

To: News Editors and Assignment Editors.

From: Anytown Citizens Group, tel: 222-222-2222

Event: Press Conference for Anytown Citizens' Group Petition Drive Kick-Off, 4³⁰ pm, Wednesday, Jan. 17, City Hall, Room #101.

Subject: Anytown Citizens Group President Mary Smith and Petition Drive Coordinator John Hancock will announce the beginning of a petition drive calling for clean-up of the old Anytown Factory waste site by the Anytown Public Health Department.

- Prepare **your spokesperson(s)** to deliver your message. Generally, it's good to have just one or two speakers during a 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 so s/he will be able to respond to questions after the statement.

Often reporters will want to interview the spokesperson. Let the press know that the speaker is

available after press conference. Prepare your speaker with 30-second answers for radio or TV, and quotable, simple messages for print reporters. Help your speaker practice with a video camera or tape recorder.

- Choose a **moderator** (facilitator) for the press conference. You will need a person to control the process and keep reporters on the subject. If someone goes off subject, the moderator can return the focus by 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 everybody understands his/her 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 shouldn't be longer than 10-15 minutes. After the speakers are finished, ask for questions. Make your

Ten Steps For a Successful News 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 fax a news advisory.

Step 6: Write the statement you plan to make at the press conference.

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.

answers simple, brief, and pointed. A little bit of humor will enliven the 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 your important points are made, step in and conclude the proceeding. 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 problem.

Making your statement

Think through how you can get your message across through the statement and the 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

Think: "How can we set up our press conference to give reporters a good picture?"

- Seat speakers at the front close together so they all fit in the picture.
- Seat the audience close to the speakers so they are in the picture. It's good to have children and elderly people 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 an action during the conference with movement and a lots of people and signs to 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 press conference.
- Singing or chanting make great sound .
- If you're holding the press conference at a rally or event with a lot of people and noise, set up a quiet space away from the action for interviews.

Print media: verbal impact

Ask: "What would we want if we were newspaper reporters?"

- Provide a press packet with background material.
- 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 ready to discuss that matter at this time," or "Our group has not taken a position on that."



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 press conference to make sure no one leaves early, getting a jump on their competition.

How to Hold a Press Conference

The Checklist

Press 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 press conference:

1. Are the date, time, and place convenient for the media and guests?
2. How many people do you expect? Do you have enough space to accommodate all the invited people? Did you invite everyone you want there?
3. What if not everyone shows up? Do you have a smaller room available so you don't have five people in an auditorium?
4. 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.)
5. Do you plan to make photos for reporters who did not attend your press conference for whatever reason? To make it convenient for the print media, use 8" X 10" prints.
6. 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?
7. Are there members of your group in your office whom the media can reach to follow up?
8. Did media people who did not come to the press conference receive a press kit?
9. After you've checked all of these, check them again. Try to prepare for all possible situations.

More about Press Conferences:

Principles of Community Organizing, training session held twice each year by the Western Organization of Resource Councils.

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; tel: 212-629-8850; 1-800-5-HUNGRY; fax: 212-465-9274; whyria@aol.com; <http://www.iglou.com/why>.

Getting the Word Out in the Fight to Save the Earth, by Richard Beamish. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2715 North Charles Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21218-4319.

More How-To's:

How to Deal With Intimidation
How to Research for Organizing
How to Use the Freedom of Information Act
How to Research Corporations
How to Hold an Accountability Session
How to Deal With the Wise Use Movement
How to Do a Radio Commentary for the High Plains News Service
How to Recruit Members
How to Develop a Winning Strategy
How to Run Good Meetings

Available for \$2 each. Contact WORC about getting copies in bulk or about training sessions on topics in this series. **Let us know** when you use these How-To's. Give us suggestions for improving and updating them.

More about WORC:

The **Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC)** is a federation of six grassroots membership organizations with more than 6,000 members and 42 community-based groups. The members of these groups are farmers, ranchers, small business and working people who seek to protect natural resources, family farms, and rural communities. WORC provides research and organizing assistance to its member groups to increase their effectiveness on regional and national public policy decisions affecting their members. Find out more about WORC, and hear our award winning radio program, the High Plains News Service, on the World Wide Web: <http://www.worc.org>.

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