

The Change Toolkit

Chapter 12. Top media tips from CLC media experts

This Chapter shares tips from community legal centre experts about working with the media.

David Manne, Refugee and Immigration Legal Centre

- Keep it simple: would it be understood around the dinner table with family/friends?
- Keep it crisp and compelling, but circumspect and completely accurate. Don't embellish or exaggerate.

Tamar Hopkins, Principal Lawyer, Flemington Kensington

- For print media, sending the journalist the quotes from you that you want them to use is a good way of not getting misrepresented. For other media, if possible, get copies of transcripts to check for accuracy and fair context before it goes to air.
- Have a media referral network, that is other people working on similar issues you can refer journalists to so that there are many voices the journalist can choose from, and those closer to the actual topic can speak.

Phil Lynch, former Executive Director, Human Rights Law Centre

- Be clear as to your key message and your two or three key points and don't be afraid to repeat them over and over. Particularly for print media and pre-records, this

increases the likelihood that your grab will be right on message.

- Rapid responsiveness is crucial. AAP regularly writes stories for the wire relying on only 1 or 2 releases and generally

without speaking to sources. This means that you need to get your release out within, say, 30-60 mins max of a major development if you want to be picked up by AAP (which then makes it much more likely you'll be syndicated and picked up by other outlets).

Gerard Brody, Director, Consumer Action Law Centre

- You know a lot more about the subject than the journalist. They are contacting you for the information, don't be scared to speak authoritatively and don't be told what to say.
- Nothing is 100% off the record. Unless you're very confident in your relationship with the journalist, or are both very clear about the nature of your discussion, any comment you make may end up as a quote in a story. Be very clear about your messages and stick to them.

Nicole Rich, Director of Research and Communications, Victoria Legal Aid (formerly Director of Policy and Campaigns at the Consumer Action Law Centre)

1) Relationships

For me, most media work is actually about relationships with reporters so I find it helpful to think of "dealing with the media" through a relationships prism. If you are wanting to build up your centre's media work, you will need to build relationships with reporters so that they get to know you and have confidence that

- (a) you are a good source to go to for comment, and
- (b) will trust you when you go to them to run one of your stories.

This relationship is built on two main pillars - you are reliable, and you are able to provide useful comment that demonstrates some expertise/authenticity.

Even the first time you are dealing with a reporter, things like whether you get back to them quickly (reliability) and the mastery of the subject you demonstrate start to build that relationship. Many of us forget that the reporter is a person trying to do their own job, and get annoyed when they get something factually imperfect, or bump us from the quotes, or don't run all 10 sentences we gave them. But reporters have their own needs, eg to finish writing the story quickly and to give readers something entertaining. If you remember that, you do a better job - you stick to one easy to understand message or you don't take it personally that they bumped you as next time, maybe you will get in the story.

2) Practice makes perfect

Yes, some people have more or less aptitude for media work but, like everything, you can and will get better with practice. Sure it can be

scary, but why assume you'll be terrific at it on day one - were you a great lawyer on day one of law school? There are lots of ways you can get more practice in - e.g. do a trial run before an interview with a colleague, or seek out low risk media opportunities such as student or community radio.

3) Forethought not afterthought

A lot of the time the media side of our work is still the afterthought - "we're in the middle of an important legal case, maybe we should talk to the media about it" type of thing. Instead, media should be part of the planning stage - you should know why and when you might want to do some media and in many instances even structure aspects of your legal work to suit. For example, you might choose to file a legal action on a Monday morning instead of a Friday afternoon so that the media release you time to go out at the same time is more likely to be picked up, or in choosing which client's case to run as a test case, you take into account which clients are willing to talk about their experience to reporters. I think this one is really important - media isn't the icing on the cake of our legal work, it is a critical part of it, because our context for providing services is that our funding is finite so we will never be able to deliver individual legal services to all who need them, so we need to be considering how to get more impact out of each instance of service.

Acknowledgments

This chapter has been downloaded from <http://www.thechangetoolkit.org.au>. We recommend checking back to see if the content has been updated.

The Change Toolkit was prepared by the Federation of Community Legal Centres. The Federation is the peak body for community legal centres across Victoria.

The Federation can be contacted at:
Level 3, 225 Bourke Street
Melbourne VIC 3000 Australia
Phone: (03) 9652 1500
Email: administration@fclc.org.au