

2018 ELECTION ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

Communications: Crafting key messages and getting media coverage

OCUFA

Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations
Union des Associations des Professeurs des Universités de l'Ontario

Developing effective key messages

Concise, clear messages that promote action are essential to any media strategy, document, or interaction. They allow you to construct effective press releases, focus your interviews, and be consistent with reporters and editors. A strong set of messages has four elements:

PROBLEM/ISSUE

Clearly define the reason for the media event, press release, or media interaction.

Example: *“The University Administration is attempting to cut the budgets of several departments on campus.”*

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

This explains why the media – and by extension, the public – should be interested in the problem, issue, or event.

Example: *“This will harm the quality of education of our institution and hurt our students.”*

SOLUTION

You need to provide a solution or resolution to the issue or problem you have defined.

Example: *“The University Administration must not pursue these harmful cuts. Instead, they should lobby the provincial government for an appropriate level of public investment.”*

ACTION

An effective message outlines what needs to be done to achieve the desired solution. Ideally, this will provide some way for the public to get involved with your initiative or campaign.

Example: *“If you are concerned about the cuts at our university, please let the administration know by sending them a letter of concern.”*

Tips for effective messages

- ▶ Define your audience before crafting your messages (Students? Faculty? Politicians? Media?). Who you are speaking to will determine how you focus and construct each point.
- ▶ Messages are most effective when they are personal. That is, when they speak to how an issue will impact an individual or group of individuals, and how they can become involved in the solution.
- ▶ Make sure all of your messages are supported by solid, well-researched facts, and that you have easy access to this data before doing interviews.
- ▶ Make sure all of your spokespeople are familiar with your key messages before talking to the media. Consistency across your faculty association is important.
- ▶ While key messages are very important. Some situations will require you to go beyond your messages, or develop new ones.

The election special newsletter

Provincial elections are an ideal time for faculty associations to connect with their members. Election newsletters can provide important party platform and voting information. They can also help build greater awareness and solidarity on campus. Newsletters need not only go to faculty; they can also be distributed to students, other unions, and the broader community.

Possible content could include:

- ▶ **Voting information:** Key dates, riding boundaries, voting times, advance polls, candidate names, contact information for campaign offices, times, and places of all-candidates meetings.
- ▶ **Questionnaire results:** Prior to the election, OCUFA will circulate draft candidate questionnaires to send to local candidates. The answers can be included as part of the newsletter. Care must be taken to treat all candidates fairly and objectively, while giving an accurate description of their positions.
- ▶ **Candidate profiles:** One of the prime objectives of faculty association involvement in the election is to generate interest among members and provide information which will help place postsecondary issues before the candidates and the public.

It is important that faculty members have information about the candidates. A profile giving the service record and biographical information of the candidates, accompanied by a photograph, would be helpful. You can contact the campaign headquarters of each candidate to get accurate biographical information and photos.

- ▶ **Issues profile:** Your newsletter may want to highlight concerns about faculty hiring, fairness for contract faculty, educational quality, and tuition fees in higher education. You may also want to highlight campus-specific concerns. Issues should be expressed in a straight-forward, journalistic style.

Adapted from the OSSTF/FEESO Election Kit.

Crafting a media release

What is a media release?

Media releases provide news outlets and reporters with your messaging about an issue or event. Journalists will use them as sources of specific information and starting points for stories. A good release will alert media to the story and encourage them to investigate and follow up with you directly.

There are two types of media releases:

- ▶ **A media advisory:** Intended to notify reporters and editors about a specific event. They can also be used to indicate that your faculty association is available to comment on an issue or event (such as the release of a new report or the provincial budget). Media advisories are usually released one to two days before the highlighted event.
- ▶ **A general release:** Intended to deliver your message on a given issue or event directly to reporters and editors. They contain your key messages, specific information on the story, several quotes from your representatives, and contact information. An effective general release both informs and engages media. It is a starting point for a conversation that hopefully results in positive coverage.

Distribution

Most media releases are distributed electronically. This can take several forms:

- ▶ **E-mail:** You can send the release directly to reporters in your community who are potentially interested in the story. It is useful to maintain a list of media contacts for this kind of distribution. If you have a relationship with a particular reporter or news outlet, they will be more likely to cover your story. OCUFA can help provide you with local media lists.
- ▶ **News wire services:** These organizations distribute news releases widely, to local, regional, and national media. While efficient, they can also be expensive. If you think you have a story that is worth putting out on a newswire, OCUFA can help.

If your release concerns a specific event – such as a budget announcement or press conference – it is a good idea to bring printed copies of your release for distribution to reporters who attend.

Tips for a good media release

- ▶ A good, punchy headline will capture interest and encourage journalists to read your release.

A sample media release

New report finds today's students are paying more for less

TORONTO – A new report released today by the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA) finds that declining quality and rising tuition fees means that university students are paying more money for less education. When measured against several key indicators of learning quality, students in the 1960s received a better education than students today – for a bargain price.

"Engagement with full-time faculty and high-quality labs and classrooms are cornerstones of a meaningful university experience," said Professor Gyllian Phillips, President of OCUFA. "This new research shows that students are learning in ever-larger classes and aging infrastructure. When you consider the tuition fees these students must pay, it's clear they are not getting the same value their parents did."

The study, *The Decline of Quality at Ontario Universities: Shortchanging a Generation*, contrasts the student experience in the 1960s, 1990s, and the present day. Students in the 1960s learned in small classes and benefitted from brand-new facilities. Now, Ontario has the highest student-to-faculty ratio in Canada, and much of the province's campus infrastructure is now decades old. Without the ability to engage with their professors and access state-of-the-art labs, libraries and classrooms, students are just not getting the same educational depth as their counterparts in the 1960s. Ontario also has tuition fees higher than anywhere else in the country, both in terms of absolute dollars and as a proportion of university operating revenue.

"The decline in quality at Ontario universities is a problem forty years in the making. It is not the fault of any one government, but the result of years of under-funding and misguided policies," said Langer. "Our university system is now at a crossroads. Down one path is further decline. Down the other is well-funded, high-quality higher education that meets the needs of our province. OCUFA believes that renewed government investment in higher education is the only way to ensure the value of an Ontario university degree for today's students and generations of students to come."

Founded in 1964, OCUFA represents over 17,000 faculty and academic librarians in 28 faculty associations across Ontario. For more information, please visit the OCUFA website at www.ocufa.on.ca.

-30-

Contact: Ben Lewis – 416 979 2117 x232 (office) or 416-306-6033 blewis@ocufa.on.ca

Guide to a sample media release

- 1** *The title should, in as few words as possible, explain what the story is all about. If possible, the headline should contain an 'action', or verb ('finds'). It should also contain a hook, or something that intrigues the reader ('paying more for less'). Remember to keep it short – eight-to-ten words is a good target.*
- 2** *This is the 'lead', or the most important part of the release. The first sentence restates the headline, but with more information. All of the most important information – the who, what, where & when – are expressed in these two sentences.*
- 3** *Quotes can play a variety of roles in a press release. Here, it is used to state the 'why' of the story, or the reason it is important. It also contains several key messages. Quotes are the ideal place to include more evocative and passionate statements.*
- 4** *This paragraph contains data and key statistics that expand upon the information provided in the lead. It serves to provide deeper context for individuals interested in the story.*
- 5** *This quote provides additional context and concludes with an essential part of the messaging around this story – namely, how do solve the problem outlined in the release?*
- 6** *The last paragraph should provide more information on your organization. It can also include a link to your website, should the reader want more information.*
- 7** *Press releases always end with "-30-". Why? Probably because telegrams used to end in "XXX" ... seriously.*
- 8** *Be sure to include contact information of your spokesperson or media manager. Make sure that person is available to take calls after the release is distributed.*

- ▶ **Use the “inverted pyramid”:** The most important information comes first, followed by supporting information. The who, what, where, when and why of the story should be in the first paragraph. Reporters are taught to write in this style, and using it allows you to ‘speak their language’.
- ▶ **Avoid jargon or technical language:** Your release should be written in a focused, conversational style that can be widely understood by a general audience.
- ▶ **Keep it short and simple:** The release should be focused on your key messages and be around 250–400 words. There should be around 5–7 short paragraphs of around 3–4 sentences. Reporters won’t read dense or overly long releases.
- ▶ **Don’t repeat yourself:** This is especially important with quotes. You don’t want your spokesperson to restate the lead over and over again.
- ▶ **Follow-up:** Phone local reporters to make sure they received the release. This can help focus them on the story.
- ▶ **Be persistent:** Your release may not generate media coverage. But the next time you put a release out, reporters will be more familiar with your organization and your message.

Crafting an Op-Ed article

What is an Op-Ed?

An Op-Ed is an opinion-based article published on a newspaper or magazine's editorial page (both print and online). While many of these articles are solicited or produced by columnists, most newspapers welcome submissions and suggestions.

Successful Op-Eds almost always respond or relate to topical issues. You can use an Op-Ed to place an issue in the public eye, but it will need to be pitched in relation to a current news story. For example, an Op-Ed on higher education quality can be framed within the context of the current recession: "we need high-quality higher education to jump-start our economy."

Pitching an Op-Ed

To place an Op-Ed, you will need to contact the Op-Ed editor at your target publication through email or phone. Email addresses are easier to get, but phone calls are more effective. Call the news outlet's main line if you can't locate the editor's phone number.

When discussing your idea, be receptive to the editor's suggestions on how best to communicate your ideas. Editors will usually give you an honest assessment of whether they are interested in your article, but they cannot give you a guarantee they will publish it.

Once you have submitted an Op-Ed, be prepared to accept editing suggestions from the editor. If they suggest you remove a key point, you will need to explain why it is important to the piece.

Tips for effective Op-Eds

- ▶ Like media releases, Op-Eds should be conversational and avoid complicated statistics or technical language. However, they can be more in-depth. A good length for an Op-Ed is 600–700 words.
- ▶ Op-Eds should also use the 'inverted pyramid'. Put the most important information and messages first.
- ▶ Monitor the editorial page of your targeted publication closely. This will give you an idea of what they're focusing on, and will allow you to pitch your article more effectively.
- ▶ Only pitch to one publication at a time – you don't want to get in an awkward situation where your article is accepted by more than one outlet. Editors want unique and exclusive content. If you are turned down by your target publication, it is acceptable to pitch your article to another magazine or newspaper.

Crafting a Letter to the Editor

Letters to the Editor?

Most newspapers, magazines and blogs allow their readers to comment on articles or editorials instantaneously online. However, the letter to the editor can still be an effective communications tool that allows you to put your messages in front of a wide audience. Letters pages remain one of the most-read sections in newspapers. Many politicians also use letter pages to informally sample public opinion.

Letters can be sent whenever you have an opinion to express, but are most effective when they fit into your messaging strategy.

Placing a Letter to the Editor

Most newspapers and magazines have a dedicated email address for submitting letters, available on their websites.

Timeliness is important with letters. Be sure to respond to an article or editorial immediately to attract the most interest.

Tips for effective Letters to the Editor

- ▶ Always use a straightforward, conversational style. Humour is often effective in letters to the editor.
- ▶ The best letters are short and simple – stick to a length of about 200 words and focus on one key point.
- ▶ Include contact information when you submit the letter

Tips for giving a media interview

Media interviews present an opportunity for faculty associations to communicate with a large audience. It is a chance to present your messages and the information you believe the public needs to hear.

Before to the interview

- ▶ **Opportunity knocks:** When a reporter calls for an interview, first determine the best person to give the interview. Give that person time to get prepared. Develop a strategy with a set of goals of what you would like to accomplish in giving the interview. Consider it an opportunity to get your message out.
- ▶ **Don't get caught unprepared:** Don't take on "cold interviews" like the phone call at 8:30 a.m. when you haven't even had time to hang up your coat. If you are cold-called, get preliminary information from the reporter – what is the story about, what information are they hoping that you can provide, what is their deadline for the interview, where will the story appear, etc. – and then tell them you will call back soon.
- ▶ **Do a pre-interview interview:** Get the reporter's full name and the media outlet they represent; probe tactfully for the reporter's intentions (this can also be done by someone assisting you) ostensibly to get you better prepared; ask what the interview will focus on; and try to determine what kind of story they want to get out of it for publication or broadcast.
- ▶ **Set the agenda:** Define your area of expertise before the interview starts so you're certain the story will coincide with your ability to comment effectively. Establish any limits to your expertise up front.
- ▶ **Work quickly:** Some issues are more urgent than others, and reporters may be on a tight deadline. Speed in getting out the appropriate statement often matters as much, or more, as what you actually say. But make sure you still take the time to mentally prepare. Remember that everything follows from your first statement, so it must hold up under scrutiny.
- ▶ **Set the time:** If possible, schedule the interview for a time that's convenient to you. Ask about deadlines and be prepared to negotiate. Return media calls as quickly as possible.
- ▶ **Help select place:** It's your interview, so you should have some input in where it will be held – inside, outside, at your desk, standing, sitting etc. Your comfort level is the issue. But be aware that the cameraperson and reporter have limitations imposed by technology. They can't shoot you with your back to a window because of the lighting problems. But if you do some research, you should be able to have credible input as to where the interview actually takes place. These things can be negotiated.

- ▶ **Eye to eye is better:** It isn't always possible, but try to be interviewed in person (as opposed to by phone). Research has shown these stories tend to be more accurate. It also gives you opportunity to give the reporter your facts and figures, key messages, etc., in written form (i.e. media release, background papers, briefing notes, journal articles, or statistics).
- ▶ **Prepare your key messages:** The media interview is an opportunity to tell your faculty association's story, which you should encapsulate and summarize in a few key messages. You should try to insert these into the interview at every appropriate moment:
 - ▶ Research your facts
 - ▶ Develop your main message (see pages 2 and 3)
 - ▶ Anticipate questions and responses
 - ▶ Rehearse your responses

Giving the interview

- ▶ **Off the record?** There's no such thing so avoid it. Sometimes off-the-record background sessions are requested by the reporter, but you must still be very careful in these situations. The information has a way of surfacing in unexpected ways. Reporters are under no obligation to respect "off-the-record" information.
- ▶ **Be yourself:** This is very important to effective communication.
- ▶ **Be honest:** If you don't know an answer, say so. Promise to get an answer for the reporter if it's at all possible. Always avoid using the phrase "No comment".
- ▶ **Be confident and positive:** Speak in simple, clear sentences. Always keep your goals and key messages in mind. You're the expert now.
- ▶ **Be polite:** Avoid being rude, hostile, or confrontational with a reporter. This detracts from your message. As Mark Twain once said: "Never argue with someone who buys ink by the barrel".
- ▶ **Listen carefully:** This may seem obvious, but sometimes people get so anxious, they don't actually listen to what is being asked. Taking some notes during the questions can help.
- ▶ **Condense your answers:** This is especially helpful in TV and radio interviews where they look for summary answers that fit into taped reports – the so-called 15-second 'sound bite'. This also works in print interviews because it helps you to focus on your goals and key points.

- ▶ **Avoid jargon (keep it simple):** Journalists are usually not very well informed on what you do or who you represent. So, keep it simple without talking down to them. Academia already has a reputation for making simple things unnecessarily complex – here is an opportunity for you to demonstrate that you can communicate clearly.
- ▶ **Don't limit yourself to the questions asked:** To get your key messages in you may have to turn a question or two around, or ignore the question entirely. For example, you might say: "I think the main issue here is ..." or "I don't think that's the main point". This is acceptable, but don't overuse this technique because you could be seen to be evasive.
- ▶ **Reporters make mistakes too:** Reporters, particularly young ones, often make the mistake of asking two questions at the same time. In this case, answer the question you like better. Don't feel obligated to do the reporter's job for them.
- ▶ **Techno-babble:** Sometimes you have to use technical language to get the main points across, especially if it's a research story. That's okay, but explain the technical stuff in simple language with clear analogies.
- ▶ **To joke or not to joke?** Humour is often a very personal thing and in an interview, when anything you say can be taken out of context, it often backfires. Try to avoid jokes and quips.
- ▶ **Repeat your key messages:** At the end of the interview, summarize for the reporter. Be straightforward if you like. "The main points I hope you got out of this interview with me are"

Things to watch for

Reporters will try different techniques to obtain their information. Often, these are standard interview methods taught in journalism schools.

- ▶ **Funnel interview:** Starts very generally and informally to get you talking, often about anything but the topic at hand. The questions then get more pointed and specific. If it's an adversarial interview, leading questions will be sprung towards the end.
- ▶ **Inverted funnel:** The start is very abrupt and to the point. In an adversarial interview this can be quite a shock, so take a deep breath before you answer. If necessary, ask them to repeat the question to gain some time to think.
- ▶ **Leading questions:** Take the form of questions like "Don't you agree that the university faculty have a problem here?" The correct technique is to answer by recasting the situation and slipping in your key messages. "University faculty has always been leaders in this area and here are three examples of what I mean." And so on. Don't fall into the trap of a leading question.

- ▶ **Babbling rambling roses get pricked:** The funnel interview, which seems to be leading nowhere with no particular urgency, often presents lots of rope with which to hang oneself. Once your guard is dropped, this type of interview contains more potential pitfalls than any other type. It's okay to be friendly and talk about all kinds of things, but remember the reporter interviewing you is there to do a job – and everything is ON THE RECORD.
- ▶ **Putting words in your mouth:** Reporters are taught to turn an answer around by rephrasing what you just said, sometimes putting a pejorative spin on the answer. Be polite but firm. Simply tell them that's not what you said. Then repeat your main points.
- ▶ **Interruptions:** This sometimes happens when reporters get overly aggressive and confrontational. Don't let reporters cut you off and interrupt your answer. It's rude. Keep your cool and calmly say something like, "I'm sorry. You're interrupting me in the middle of my answer. Please show me some courtesy and let me finish." Most of the public will identify with you, not the bullying reporter.
- ▶ **Recording devices:** Just be aware that, in addition to TV and radio reporters who must record the interview, many print reporters also record interviews either in person or over the phone. Sometimes they're voice activated and sit inside their shirt pockets. They are not obliged by any law to tell you they're recording. In any case, this isn't something to be feared. They use the tape for accuracy.

Audio recorders are sometimes left running when you think they're off. TV cameramen will sometimes actually put their cameras on the ground and start putting their gear away as though signaling the end of the interview, but the tape is left running in case you say something in an unguarded moment. Unless the reporter explicitly indicates otherwise, always assume you are being recorded.

- ▶ **Cutaways:** TV reporters will sometimes film 'cutaways' that show them listening to the interviewee or repeating questions they asked previously. They use this footage to make their stories more visually interesting. During the filming of a cutaway, they might ask a question that seems random, but treat this as a serious part of the interview. Don't end up contradicting what you said when the camera was on you in the first place. Stay on-message until the reporters have left the room.
- ▶ **Getting the angle:** Reporters may say they need to re-ask a question with another camera angle or background. They will move you around and start all over again. Make sure your answers are consistent.
- ▶ **Repeating the question:** Reporters will sometimes repeat a question with a slightly different twist. Make sure your answer is solid and consistent with what you have already stated. Use this as an opportunity to tighten up your answer. Journalists will appreciate a more concise answer.

Looking good on camera

- ▶ Be your normal self, don't overact or over enunciate now that you're on camera.
- ▶ Look at the interviewer, not the camera.
- ▶ Try to minimize movement and gestures (especially if you tend to speak with your hands). It's acceptable to use the odd gesture to emphasize a verbal point, but excessive hand movement can be distracting and irritating to the viewer.
- ▶ Try to use some voice modulation for emphasis, especially when communicating the key messages that you have prepared in advance.
- ▶ Try to avoid flashy jewelry and clothes because they are exaggerated by TV.
- ▶ Practice giving succinct answers of no more than 15–20 seconds that encapsulate your main points. Verbal lists can help here: "To understand this situation it's helpful to remember the following three things ..." It is a good idea to write these down in case you get stuck.
- ▶ In television, good visuals are very important and will actually drive the story – campus scenes, photos that reproduce well, people involved in live action, lab scenes, etc. If you help the reporter find the shots they need, you build a more amenable relationship.

After the interview

- ▶ Most reporters won't let you see or read the story before it is printed or broadcast. Often they can't tell when it will be printed, although most TV and radio reporters are working for broadcasts that same day.
- ▶ It is permissible to ask the interviewer if they made note of certain points you were trying to get across during the interview. It is also okay to call afterward and, in a friendly way, ask for a review of the story. Many reporters will be obliging and may even read parts of a story for you.
- ▶ You may also call the reporter with further information or clarification, especially if the interview left you uneasy in some way or new and relevant information has come to your attention.

(Adapted and expanded from "Tips for giving a media interview" courtesy of the University of Waterloo.)