

A GUIDE TO

EARNED MEDIA

2018

Organizing for Action

EARNED MEDIA

The importance of earned media

A key strategy for persuading elected officials on an issue is to bring their attention to the broad public support or opposition that exists for the issue you are working on. We know through experience that elected officials pay close attention to the press coverage in their local news outlets because they know that such coverage both reflects opinions among their constituents and influences the opinions of others. You can use earned media to get your issue covered in the local press—and in front of your elected leaders.

When we say “earned media,” we mean stories that run as news in a local newspaper, blog, radio, or TV station. They are “earned” because we planned an event that was newsworthy enough to be covered by one of these sources. In other words, earned media is the opposite of paid media, which are also known as advertisements. Earned media is effective in persuading both elected leaders and constituents because news outlets are trusted sources for information.

This guide covers what an effective earned media event looks like, how to pitch it to the press, and what you can do online to amplify the coverage you receive. Let’s dig in!

Traits of an effective earned media event

Through our own organizing experience, we’ve developed some best practices for setting up an event that’s most likely to earn press coverage and convey a powerful message to key decision makers and constituents. It all comes down to four key elements: message, speakers, location, and local connection.

Message

The message is the main idea you’re trying to convey. While there might be many specific policy points that are important to supporters within a single issue area, the main message communicates why the issue is important and its ultimate goal. When you are organizing your event, it’s important that the remarks, location, and signage at the event all help to express the main goal of the positions you’re advocating for. What people say and how the location looks will give viewers and readers additional clues as to what your issue is about and a better sense of why the community should support your position on the issue.

Speakers

The person delivering the message at your earned media event is important. While volunteers are the face of Organizing for Action, speakers at earned media events should be chosen carefully and with a specific intent. We like to think of possible speakers at an earned media event falling into three categories: surrogate, validator, and constituent.

A surrogate is a person who can be considered a “local celebrity” and would help to attract media interest. This could be a local elected official, media personality, or sports figure.

A validator is a person who can speak with authority on the subject, and who your audience will consider a trusted expert. This could be a scientist talking about climate change, or a small business owner talking about the economic impact of a particular issue.

A constituent is a person from the community who is impacted by the issue. They use their personal story to illustrate why the policy is important and how it affects the lives of people in the community.

A well-planned earned media event makes use of all three types of speakers in order to present community support for the issue from a variety of perspectives.



Location

The location of your earned media event is important for a number of reasons:

Location should reinforce the message. You want your location to illustrate the message of your event. For example, if your message is “healthcare reform will be good for local businesses,” it would be a great idea to have your earned media event at a local business that will benefit from an issue like healthcare reform (and have the business owner be one of your speakers). Try to imagine what a photo taken of your event will look like. Oftentimes people will just see a photo of your event without much explanation, so it’s important that the optics of your event are able to partly communicate your message on their own—and the location is a key part of that.

Location should suit the crowd. It’s helpful to hold your event in a space that fits your audience size (not too big and not too small). How full the room feels will have an impact on the energy of your event, as well as the optics mentioned above. Ideally, the room will be comfortably full so that there are no major empty spaces, but enough space for people to feel at ease.

You should have control over your location. You want to make sure your event is not interrupted and that your agenda can run smoothly, so it will be helpful to have it in a place that you’ve reserved and where you can control access.

Location should be accessible to media. When you’re choosing the location, consider the reporters who you want to attend and make sure that it is easily accessible to their offices.

Local connection

Perhaps most important element to consider when planning an earned media event is making sure that it highlights a local connection. What makes stories on local news so influential to community members is that they illustrate why the issue is important to people like them—people in their own area and neighborhoods. While the issues moving through Congress are covered in the national press, it’s the local coverage that can make it clear how each issue will impact the local communities where we organize. Your event should make a compelling case to the constituents in your community, and in turn motivate them to advocate for your cause to their elected official.

Earned media is one of the most effective tactics for persuading elected officials because it amplifies your message, makes it clear how the actions of elected officials will impact the local community, and demonstrates the growing community support for your position. When you are successful in organizing earned media events, you drive the local conversation to respond to your supporters’ positions, compelling elected officials to take notice.

Getting the press to cover your events

To be clear, generating earned media coverage is not easy. Even if you're able to put on an event with a powerful message, compelling speakers, a perfect location, and a meaningful local connection, the press will not just simply show up to cover your event. It takes an intentional and strategic effort to get reporters to attend and then publish or broadcast a story about your event.

Because of the unpredictable nature of current events, we can't expect to be 100% in control of the media—sometimes, breaking news stories will inevitably come up which the press may need to cover instead of your event. However, there are three tools that can work together to help you maximize the likelihood of the press showing up to your event: a press contact list, press advisories, and pitch calls.

Keeping a Press Contact List

In order to always be ready to reach the press about your upcoming events, you should build and maintain a press contact list in your area. If you're just getting started, you'll need to do some research to find the contact information for press outlets and reporters in your area. Over time, as you work with more organizations and people, you'll gain additional contacts that you should be adding to your list on a regular basis.

How to research for your press list:

- **Make a list of every local news outlet you can think of in your area.** This includes television stations, major and minor newspapers, local magazines or blogs, and radio news stations.
- **Then, get online and do some searching to find contact information for these news outlets.** Many news outlets will share a general “tips” email address on their website, or a phone number for the “assignment desk.” This is a great start, but don't stop there.
- **In order to get your event in front of the right people, also search for editors and reporters who cover your topic.** For example, if your earned media event focuses on healthcare, your city newspapers may have a Politics and Government editor, as well as a Health editor—both would be good contacts to have. If you want to know which reporters are covering your topic, look through the local paper and pay attention to bylines, or watch the news to see which reporters are doing features on topics that may be related to yours.

TIP:

All of these outlets and reporters will likely be avid Twitter users. Collect their Twitter handles, too, and look for smart opportunities to reach out to them.

Organizing your press list

As you gather contact information about local press outlets, try to organize it all into one master list of press contacts. As you build your list, it's helpful to have one central place that you can keep going back to for all future earned media events, rather than starting from scratch every time. With that said, your event will not necessarily be a good fit for every contact on your press list. For example, an event on immigration reform may not be relevant to the health editor mentioned in the example above. Because of this, it's helpful to structure your master press list so that you can easily sort and choose which contacts you'll notify for each specific event based on what will be most relevant.

Reporter	Beat	Outlet	Phone	Email	Past Events
Assignment Desk	Assignment Desk	NBC10	###-###-####	wcaudesk@nbc.com	ACA Event 12/20/15
Andrew M. Hachadorian	Editor-in-Chief	Chester County Daily Local	###-###-####	andyh@dailylocal.com	
Kristina Scala	Coatesville Reporter	Chester County Daily Local	###-###-####	Kristinas@dailylocal.com	GVP Event 12/1/15
Jim Donovan	Consumer	CBS3	###-###-####	jdonovan@cbs3.com	
Bob Calandra	ACA	Philadelphia Inquirer	###-###-####	rotoca26@gmail.com	
Karl Stark	Health & Science Editor	Philadelphia Inquirer	###-###-####	kstark@phillynews.com	Climate Event 7/25/15
KYW News Desk	News Desk	KYW News Radio	###-###-####	newstips@kyw1060info.com	Climate event 7/25/15

Pitch calls

A pitch call is an opportunity to talk directly to a news outlet to tell them about your event and why they should cover it. This is where you should try to get a concrete commitment from them to cover your event. It's important to note that television stations typically have morning meetings, around 8:00 or 9:00 AM local time, to determine which stories they'll cover for that day. In the days leading up to your event, repeated and persistent pitch calls are key. You should make your first pitch calls shortly after sending out the press advisory 48 hours before your event. Then, you should continue to send press advisories and make pitch calls both the morning before and the morning of your event.

INTRODUCE YOURSELF AND THE EVENT

Hi, is this the newsroom (political/community reporter, etc)? Great! My name is [NAME], and I'm a concerned member of the community. I am part of a grassroots community group that's working to prevent gun violence and urging our members of congress to commit to do something to address this issue. On Wednesday, we are holding a gathering of supporters at First and Main Street at 11:00 AM. Community members will be coming together to call on Senator Smith to commit to do something to help reduce gun violence in our communities. We sent you a press advisory this morning—did you receive it?

EXPLAIN WHY THE EVENT IS WORTHY OF MEDIA COVERAGE (message, talkers, and local connection)

(Have a clear message) Gun violence is an issue that our community cares very deeply about right now—we expect about 40 people to attend. **(Connect the national story to the local community)** Senator Smith has yet to take a stand on this issue, so it's important that our community makes its voice heard. **(Highlight talkers who are already a media draw)** Mayor Brown and Assemblywoman Garcia will be speaking to everyone about this important issue.

MAKE AN ASK

Can I count on ABC 30 Action News to cover the event?

WRAP-UP

Great! Let me confirm the details with you—it's at 1PM, in front of Senator Smith's office, at the corner of First and Main Street (**location, location, location**). What's the best email address for me to send you the press advisory?

KEEP TRACK OF WHO YOU CALL AND THEIR RESPONSES

Just like volunteer calls, who you spoke with, their phone number, and their email address are invaluable pieces of information to use again in the future. Make sure to capture those.

Best practices for pitching to press

Give 48 hours notice

Begin generating interest in your event by emailing press advisories to news outlets at least 48 hours in advance of your event.

Follow up with a call

After emailing the initial advisory, follow up with a call to ensure they received the information and answer any questions they may have.

Call in the morning

The best time to call a newsroom is in the morning. By afternoon most reporters are under a hard deadline and will be less willing to be on the phone for very long.

Be prepared for a brush-off

Be prepared for a brush-off! Unless your event is the same day you are calling/emailing the newsroom, they will most likely not commit to attending your event, but make sure to ask when they will make the decision so you can follow up.

Give a reason to say yes

Think of your press pitch call as a volunteer call—you always have an “ask” to make, but you also need to give the reporter a reason to say yes.

Be passionate

Wear your passion on your sleeve! Your excitement will make reporters excited to attend. Try smiling while making the call.

Make it personal

Make your call personal—local reporters want to cover issues that affect their local communities specifically. Why is your elected official an important part of this conversation? Why is this issue so important to your community?

Continue to follow up

Have strong follow up. Even if you’ve already spoken to a reporter and got them to commit to attend, follow up the morning of your event with another call to confirm their attendance.

Now that we’ve discussed how to get the press to cover your event, the next thing to for you to think about is how to tell the story of your event.

Telling the story of your event

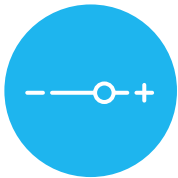
Fortunately, in today's world of social media and rapid digital communication, we don't have to rely solely on news outlets to get our message out to the public. We have Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, email, and high-quality cameras on our cell phones for that! In order to give your message the widest possible reach, in addition to engaging local media, you should do three things: Take plenty of digital photos of your event, talk publicly about your event online before, during, and after, and produce a wrap-up when your event is done.

Taking Strong Photos

No matter what platform we're using, photographs are a key tool for telling the story of our grassroots supporters and getting the word out about our issues. The best photos will show people taking action, and convey a clear message about the issue campaign. Strong photos also document what happened for anyone who couldn't see it in person. Including quality photos in your wrap-up is much more interesting than just a simple written summary of the event.



Keep it crisp. The most difficult photos to use and share are blurry photos. To avoid blurry photos, use the flash (in low light settings) or make sure your event's area is well lit. Stand still while you frame and snap your photo. Many phone cameras also make it easy to focus your shot by tapping the screen on the subject you want to frame.



Get close. Don't be afraid to get right up next to your subjects. Not only will this save you from having to use the zoom feature that often makes photos blurry, but it will also allow you to capture the details and create a photo that is much more interesting than a faraway group shot. Filling the frame of your shot completely conveys energy and action much more than the number of people in the shot.



Watch the lighting behind your subjects. If your subject is in front of a window, a lamp, or a lot of sunlight, they will show up only as silhouettes and you won't be able to see their faces in the photos—and seeing faces is what allows people to connect emotionally. Move to the side or try another angle where your subjects will be better lit.



Try to take candid—not just posed shots. The truth is, group shots don't convey why you're taking action. It's great to get staged, smiling photos, but they're much less likely to get attention. Get the posed photos out of the way early, allowing everyone to get to work and allowing you to take candid photos throughout the event. Your subjects will be more comfortable with you taking their candid action shots if you've already taken posed photos of them.



Take several snaps of each photo. In the heat of an event, it's not easy to capture a high quality photo on the first try. Each time you take a photo, take that same photo 3-5 times. Then, after the event, you'll be more likely to find one shot within the batch that really captures what you wanted!

Amplifying your event before, during, and after

With social media (namely Facebook and Twitter), you have the opportunity to tell the whole story of the actions you take. Building a narrative arc that follows the preparation, execution, and follow-up of your actions gives extra opportunities for people in your social network to engage with your organizing. This allows you to paint a clear picture of the continuous grassroots activities you are coordinating in your community. It also serves as another channel for getting elected leaders to take notice of the strength of your organizing and to consider your position on the issues.

Before the event: Use social media to build excitement for your event in the days leading up to it. Start using the event hashtag* in this early content, so that all your storytelling can be seen in one place and as part of a broader conversation. You can build excitement by sharing key information about what will happen at the event, such as who the talkers will be, sharing photos of event preparation activities (such as sign making), and promoting the link to your event page so that others can sign up to attend.

**Keep in mind that a hashtag is strong when there's a high volume of tweets that use it. For this reason, if you're not sure what hashtag to use, you can check the OFA twitter account, or look to other progressive organizations for guidance.*

During the event: As the event is happening, continue to use the hashtag while sharing key moments on social media, such as photos of the event in action or quotes from speakers at the event. Encourage event attendees to do the same; the more people that are amplifying your event in real time, the more you can broadcast the message that your event is exciting and that your issue has the support of a lot of people in your community.

Some people find it difficult to manage an event, take strong photos, and post social media content all at the same time. Don't try to be a hero and take on everything at once. As a best practice, it's helpful to designate at least one specific person whose main responsibility is to do this kind of work. That way, if all else fails, you know you can count on that one person to take photos and post about the event. Just make sure you have a plan for how to share access to the photos.

After the event: This is a great time to post content on social media that summarizes the event as a whole, thanks those who participated, and reinforces the overall message of the event. This content can also include a call to take further action in the future, whether that is attending another event or sharing content online.

Producing an event wrap-up

By taking strong photos and amplifying the event before, during, and after, you have not only expanded the reach of your message in real time, but you have also amassed a collection of content that can be used to put together an “event wrap-up” after the event ends. An event wrap-up serves several purposes: First, it documents your event so that you, your chapter, and the event attendees can celebrate what you’ve accomplished and the impact you’ve made. Second, it can inspire other organizers from around the country who are doing similar work and give them ideas for their own events in the future. And finally, it gives you a chance to get your event’s message out to people and channels that may not have been there first hand, including the key decision-maker your event was meant to influence, and any press outlets that did not cover the event live.

An event wrap-up should include the following elements:

- A brief description (no more than five sentences) of what the event was and what it set out to achieve, which is consistent with the overall message of the event.
- At least three strong event photos.
- A list of notable event speakers, guests, or partner organizations present.
- At least one relevant quote from a speaker or attendee that reinforces the overall message of the event.
- Across these four elements, make sure you have covered the five Ws: who, what, when, where, and why.

Once you have compiled your wrap-up, you should share it in the following places:

- Share it with any news outlets who did not attend the event. This makes it possible for them to cover your story even if a reporter was not present. Some outlets have a feature on their website that allows you to upload your material. Otherwise, feel free to send it as an email to the same contact at the news outlet where you sent your press advisory.
- Post in your state’s group on Connect, and any other relevant issue groups of which you are a member
- Email it out to all event attendees and speakers to remind them of their impact and congratulate them on a job well done.

Report back

Please fill out the [OFA event report-back form](#) to tell us all about your event. And, as always, please share a wrap up and pictures of your event on [Connect](#), OFA’s online community organizing tool bringing volunteers, supporters, and staff together to take action.

Step-by-step guide: Before, during, and after

Below is a sample to-do list to help you complete all the tasks needed in order to use these best practices and host a stellar earned media event. Remember that no organizer should work alone—delegate out these responsibilities so that you can accomplish more!

Also, keep in mind that this timeline is merely a guide, and sometimes the unpredictable nature of organizing may require you work on a shorter time frame!

Three weeks before event

- ✓ Identify the message/purpose of the event
- ✓ Identify potential speakers for the event
- ✓ Research locations
- ✓ Plan phone banks to recruit event attendees

Two weeks before event

- ✓ Lock in location
- ✓ Start locking in speakers
- ✓ Share your event on [Connect](#) to your state or local group. If you're not sure how to use Connect, check out the [Connect Guide](#)
- ✓ Conduct phone banks and reach out to allied organizations and coalition groups to help recruit for event

One week before event

- ✓ Lock in all speakers for event, if not already complete
- ✓ Continue recruitment for event
- ✓ Do first round of confirmation calls and emails to supporters who have committed to attend the event

Three days before event

- ✓ Confirm speakers for event
- ✓ Send message guidance and sample remarks to speakers
- ✓ Recruit volunteers who can take pictures and/or video and help post online

Two days before event

- ✓ Email press advisory to news outlets in the morning
- ✓ Make first round of pitch calls to news outlets in the morning (most outlets will not yet make a commitment to attend your event at this point)
- ✓ Host a prep call or meeting with event speakers to ensure they are clear on the message for the event as well as the main details, including location, arrival time, and start time
- ✓ Prepare signs for your event that fit with the message frame
- ✓ Do second round of confirmation calls and emails to event attendees

One day before event

- ✓ Email press advisory to news outlets in the morning
- ✓ Make second round of pitch calls to news outlets in the morning
- ✓ Confirm any last-minute details with speakers
- ✓ Confirm volunteers who will take pictures or carry out any other responsibilities at your event
- ✓ Create a checklist of equipment and supplies, such as sound system, podium, etc, and make sure you have a plan to get those supplies to the event location
- ✓ Do final round of confirmation calls and emails to event attendees
- ✓ Find a hashtag for your event. If you're not sure what hashtag to use, you can check out the OFA twitter account, or look to other progressive organizations' twitter accounts for guidance

Day of event

- ✓ Make final pitch and/or confirmation calls to the press in the morning
- ✓ Huddle with other volunteers and confirm assigned tasks
- ✓ Greet event attendees and let them know how to participate and amplify the event on social media
- ✓ Greet reporters who attend the event and get their contact information (either ask them to sign in on a press sign-in sheet or get their business card)
- ✓ Post pictures and other highlights to Facebook and Twitter during your event
- ✓ Share your event wrap-up or photos with reporters who did not attend event (either via website upload or email)
- ✓ Look for and collect any press clips from your event
- ✓ Share how your event went in state/local and national issue groups on **Connect**
- ✓ Tweet as you're getting ready, as the event is happening, and after it's all wrapped up to show the world how you're organizing to make things happen!

Day after event

- ✓ Post your event wrap-up to state/local and national issue groups on **Connect**
- ✓ Send a thank you email to speakers and attendees of event, including the event wrap-up, links to positive press clips, and an ask for future action
- ✓ Tweet at event attendees using their handles to thank them for coming. A public shout-out can especially encourage people who are new to organizing to keep coming back!
- ✓ Organize your data: Keep track of event attendees, press outlets present, and event speakers so that you have a record of who came
- ✓ Celebrate and debrief what went well and what could have gone better so that you can continue to grow as an organizer!