

Media and Messaging



Have you ever heard the saying “If a tree falls in the forest, and no one hears it, does it make a sound?” The same logic is true of grass roots organizing campaigns. Inevitably your work will put you in a situation where “preaching to the converted” at resident meetings is not enough. You need to get the word out to a broader audience.

The media can be a powerful tool to get your message across. People learn from what they read, hear or watch in the media. Park-lords and elected officials are often very sensitive about their reputations, and sometimes even the threat of negative media coverage can get them to change their tune.

For the most part, manufactured home park residents have been negatively portrayed. The main reason why stereotypes and misconceptions are able to make it to the media is because of who’s sending the message. As a resident association you can begin to frame a new image and a new message regarding homeowners in your park.

It is also helpful to think outside the standard definition of media. Where do you get your news? You’ll be surprised to find that it doesn’t always involve television and the newspaper. The Internet, church bulletins, newsletters, and radio are all alternate sources for news. Targeting your media campaign around many different outlets will allow you to reach a much wider audience.

A wider audience isn’t always better. Think about who your message or story is for and pursue media outlets that specifically cater to those communities.

Getting media coverage takes work. There is no magic wand to wave that will get you coverage. To work effectively with media, you’ll have to build relationships and be strategic about your message.

There are many of benefits to using media in your campaign, but there are also risks.

Benefits of Media Coverage	Potential Risks
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Broader attention to your issue▪ Puts decision makers in the hot seat▪ Counters park prejudice▪ Organized ideas build your power	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ No guarantee coverage will be positive▪ The other side's arguments may also come out▪ The story may carry a park prejudice bias▪ Coverage can be difficult to get and unpredictable

How to use media

The best way to avoid the potential risks of negative media coverage is to be very strategic in the way you work with media. Never try to get coverage simply for the sake of getting coverage. Instead you should do a community power analysis for your campaign to decide how to include media in your tactics.

Use the media to build your power. You never want to feed into park prejudice by appearing weak and helpless. Instead you should use media as a tool to build your power; put pressure on decision makers, highlighting campaign victories or generating public outrage.

There is a difference between pity and outrage. You don't want people to feel sorry for you, you want them to get riled up and actually do something. The targets in your campaign probably feel sorry for you already, but you are targeting them because your situation is their fault. Your goal is to force them into action, not gain pity.

When to use media

Only use the media once you have answered the following questions:

- What is our message?
- What will the other side say?
- What coverage is realistic?

The best ideas in the world are meaningless if they aren't connected to a powerful message. It is with a powerful message that ideas can become actions. Here is how to construct a powerful message.

Keep it Simple

Decision makers hear from many people every year about a wide variety of issues. You want to make sure that you keep your message simple, so that it's easy for people to remember.

Appeal to values

People are unlikely to act on something that is not consistent with their values. If you want to get someone committed to the issue that you are fighting for, you have to appeal to their core values.

Know your audience

Many of the values you appeal to (justice, fairness, security, etc.) are universal. Depending on your audience, you may want to frame the issue in a slightly different way. For example, the way you talk with a park resident about an issue may be different from the way you talk to a legislator about the issue. The points you might bring out to a very conservative legislator should be different from the ones you would bring up to a very liberal one.

Speak from a position of power, not as a victim

Manufactured homeowners deserve respect, not pity. You are a leader of a strong organization that is part of a powerful national movement! You are not begging. Your power comes from being a voter who elected the decision makers. Your lot rent is what keeps the park-lords in business. They work for you! You aren't the only one supporting these issues. You have friends, neighbors, and organized groups of people who support this work. You also have strong allies.

State the problem and the solution

In order to make the case that the change you are proposing is worth the effort, you need to make the case that there is a problem. You can use your own story to personalize the problem, but you also need to talk about what that means on a broader scale. You also have to present a solution, and say specifically how the solution addresses the problem.

Be concise

It is very important to be concise. The longer you spend talking about something, the more muddled the issue becomes and you drift away from the message.

When the media is working on a story, it is important that they have an understanding of who the players are. Depending on the depth of the coverage, you may not be able to explore all of the subtle nuances of every actor. The media will generally portray park issues as two sides pitted each other. You are on one side and your targets are on the other. You have to be smart about how to describe the dynamics of the conflict. Below are some questions to consider as you craft your message.

What do You Say About Yourself?

Who are you? What do you want the media to say about you? Think about what you want the audience to think about you. Are you trying to attract sympathy or outrage? Think about the identity of the people that are impacted by your issue: homeowners, seniors, low income families, immigrants, people of color, and veterans. Frequently referring to your community as a “neighborhood” attracts more support than as a “manufactured home park.”

What is the Other Side Saying About You?

Pay attention to what the other side may say about you. Are they appealing overtly to park prejudice or racism? Or are they doing it more subtly? Do they claim to feel sorry for you or are they indifferent? Do they see your organization as legitimate or are they attacking you? The risk of a story backfiring against you depends on how the other side chooses to portray you. Be prepared to respond to their attacks, park prejudice, or racism. Know what vulnerabilities they might exploit.

What do You Say About the Other Side?

What is your problem with the other side? Is it that they fail to understand your situation, or is it something that they are deliberately doing to you? Depending on how you answer this question, the tone of how you describe the other side will change dramatically. Is the other side a villain who needs to be shamed, or someone who is misinformed but has the capacity to do the right thing? In either case, think of the vulnerabilities the other side might have, such as reputation, legal issues, or future elections. Be strategic about how you use these vulnerabilities in the media campaign.

What are They Saying About Themselves?

The other side is likely to defend themselves. What basis do they have for doing so? How do they see themselves? What values might they appeal to? What ability do they have to attract public sympathy? For example, park-lords love to portray themselves as martyrs. They are “affordable housing providers” who have “pulled themselves up by their bootstraps or “small business owners just trying to get by.” Elected officials like to portray themselves as “public servants who are looking out for the interests of the community as a whole” (notice this rarely includes you!). All of these phrases are designed to appeal to certain values and to public sympathy.

Sending out a press release is the most common way of attracting media coverage. A press release is essentially a one-page synopsis of your story, told the way you see it.

There are several things that need to be in a press release in order to attract attention. The most important thing, is to answer the basic questions “who, what, when, where” and of course “why?”

Make sure your details are accurate. Double-check the release for grammar and spelling errors. It should be well written and have all of the necessary information. Sometimes smaller media outlets like local papers will use your press release as the actual article so make sure you get it right!

Elements of a press release

- **Media contact:** the overall press coordinator from your group (typically the one who is sent out the release). Be sure to include a phone number.
- **Headline:** This should grab a reporter’s attention. This is usually the first thing a reporter looks for.
- **The Body:** This where you tell your story.
- **Interview contacts:** The names, titles and contact information for the people you want interviewed. Make sure they are prepared!

Make it interesting

Be sure to think like a reporter when writing the press release. What sparks their interest? What about this story will readers find interesting? What message are you trying to get across? How does the story relate to a broader question in society?

Typically a press release is used to attract coverage for a specific event. Organizations hold events such as rallies, protests, celebrations, and press conferences constantly. You need to make sure that your event sticks out above the rest. What makes your event different from every other event that is happening around town on a given day? Don’t assume that simply by declaring a press conference you will get any press to come to your event. You have to have a good press release and a thorough follow up.

Timing is critical

Timing is everything, if you want your press release to be effective. Various newsrooms have different processes for assigning stories to reporters, but this usually takes time. You need to be sure to allow the reporter enough time to contact people about the story and to write the story. Most reporters work on tight deadlines!

Send the release to the right person

This may seem obvious, but newsrooms are busy places with lots of activity. It is easy for your press release to end up on the wrong desk and get lost in the madness. Before sending the release, do a little research on the news organization you are sending it to. What reporters cover your area? Who has covered similar issues in the past? Who is the editor? A lot of this information can be found on-line. Doing research on the front-end can save you the headache of having to resend it to someone else. Even worse your story could be ignored because the appropriate person never got the release.

Follow Up

Once you have sent the press release, put in a call to the news organization to confirm that they have received it. This is an opportunity to make your pitch to them about why the story is important. It is fair to ask if they anticipate covering the story. If people are on the fence, generating a half dozen phone calls from park residents to the tip line or newsroom could sway them. Just make sure to be respectful; you don’t want them to get angry with you and write a bad story!

Framing a message is about shaping the way people think about your issues. It is important to keep it simple. Your message should be something everyone can understand. Try to get ahead of the game by framing your issue first. If no one has reported on your issue before, the task at hand is to pro-actively frame the issue according to what you want people to think and know about the issue. If your issue has already been reported on, you'll have to find a way to "re-frame" the message and change the terms of the debate. This is particularly true if prior coverage has been park prejudiced or racist.

Here are some examples of how a single event can be framed in several different ways, based on headlines a reporter could choose for a story:

Frame #1 Tornado destroys trailer, killing family of two

A mother and her son were killed yesterday when a tornado destroyed her small trailer while they were home. "Everyone knows that trailers are not safe places to be during severe weather," said John Doe of the local fire department, "If only she had the common sense to get out of there this whole tragedy could have been avoided."

Frame #2 Park residents blame lack of storm shelter for tornado deaths

The day after a deadly tornado hit their trailer park, residents are complaining and pointing the finger at the lack of a storm shelter in their park. "If there was a storm shelter in the park, this never would have happened," said John Doe, who lives in the park. "We are so poor and defenseless here. Someone needs to do something about this before someone else gets killed."

Frame #3 Park Owner's negligence responsible for family's death

Members of the Rainbow Park Residents Association had harsh words for their park-lord today. "Where is our lot rent going every month, if it isn't going to keep us safe?" stated Jane Doe, President of the Association. "We have been working for years to convince the owner to build a storm shelter, and he needs to be held accountable for this tragedy."

Frame #4 Ineffective storm shelter laws place MHP residents at risk

All Parks Alliance for Change, a statewide homeowners association that works to pass laws to protect the rights of manufactured homeowners, said that the recent tornado related deaths in Rainbow Park highlight the need for reform of existing storm shelter requirements. "The current law simply provides way too many loop holes. Park owners can basically get a way with whatever they want," said Bev Justice, APAC president. "This law needs to change."

Frame #5 Death of Latino family highlights racial disparities within parks

Manufactured Home Park residents have joined forces with racial justice advocacy organizations to denounce the segregation in parks that forces people of color to live in parks with the worst living conditions. "Rainbow Park is the only park in town without a storm shelter," said Juan Gonzalez, a leader in the coalition. "This is also the most racially diverse park in town. We believe that people of color deserve to live in the same conditions as everyone else. We have to eliminate these racial disparities, because in this case they are deadly."

ACTIVITY: Break into 5 groups and have each group analyze one of the five frames. Answer the following questions, according to the information contained in the story. Be prepared to share your answers with the rest of the group.

- Why did this happen?
- Who is responsible?
- What is the solution?
- What needs to change?
- How are residents portrayed?

What frames are media using?

There are many different ways that an individual can interpret an event. By doing this exercise, you can explore various frames that the media uses to interpret a singular set of facts.

Frame #1 Tornado destroys trailer, killing mother and son

This frame only talks only about the specific event, but ignores the broader issues. The story blames the mother for her family's death, promoting stereotypes and park prejudice. The frame for this story is "Individual Responsibility."

Frame #2 Park residents blame lack of storm shelter for tornado deaths

This frame correctly identifies that a lack of a shelter was a factor in the family's death, but it does not identify who is responsible. The residents are portrayed as victims who want someone to do something to help them. The frame for this story is "Residents Looking for a Handout."

Frame #3 Park Owner's negligence responsible for family's death

This frame identifies both the problem and who is responsible for the solution. The park lord needs to build a storm shelter. It also refers to residents as an organized group of people. The frame here is "Absentee Landlord."

Frame #4 Ineffective storm shelter laws place MHP residents at risk

This frame identifies a problem and a solution that are different from the previous frame. The state laws are inadequate and need to be changed. In this frame, residents are part of a statewide organization. The frame here is "Policy Change."

Frame #5 Death of Latino family highlights racial disparities within parks

This frame looks at the story through a race equity lens. Here the problem is that people of color are not given the same rights as everyone else (racism) and the solution is equal access to public safety. Here the frame is "racial justice."

Interviews are one of the only ways in which the general public can hear your message in your own words. After reading your press release, the reporter's next step is to call people for interviews.

People can find interviews intimidating. Below are some tips to help you have a successful experience.

Choose the right spokesperson

Some people within your organization will be better suited for interviews than others. Ideally you want someone who is articulate and knowledgeable about the issue. You can also choose a person who has a strong and compelling personal story that highlights the issue you are trying to address. Consider your audience, your message, and who is the best person to deliver the message.

Be Prepared

Know what your message is and what you want to accomplish with the interview. Know what audience you are trying to reach. Think about what questions they might ask, including ones that contradict your position or attempt to bring you off message. Many time reporters will ask "devil's advocate" type questions.

Present your credentials

You aren't just some random person that the media stumbled on to cover this story. You are a leader of a powerful organization. "Resident Association President" sounds a lot more credible than "trailer park resident." Use your title if applicable, if none exists use words like "member, leader, community leader, or concerned citizen.

Stay Calm

Don't panic or feel intimidated by the reporter. They are human beings too, and many of them are easy to get along with.

Stay on message

Don't get off topic or provide too many details that are irrelevant to what you are trying to accomplish. Keep it simple. Make clear points. Sometimes it may seem like you are repeating yourself a lot, but that's okay. Reporters are looking to get the best quote out of you, so they will ask you the same question in slightly different ways.

Be Respectable

Be mindful of your appearance (especially if it's a TV interview!) and avoid using unprofessional or foul language.

Tell the truth

Stick to the facts. If you don't know the answer to a question, that's okay. Just tell them you'll get back to them. If you say you will get back to them, make certain to do so. Never make stuff up or say things that are untrue.

Refer them to other people

You may want to encourage them to talk to other people about the issue. For example, if you are asked a question that is outside of your personal experience or expertise, refer the reporter to someone who can answer the question.

Follow Up

Be sure to follow up with the reporter afterwards to thank them for their interest in your story and to see if there is any additional information they need. You always want to be sure to maintain a good relationship with the reporter because you'll probably want them to do a follow up story in the future.

Provide feedback

Once the story breaks, let the reporter know what you thought about it. Good or bad, it always helps for the reporter to know that you are paying attention.