

HOW TO GET YOUR NEWS IN THE NEWS

A Media Access Handbook

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Asian American Journalists Association holds Media Access Workshops like this one to promote community access to news organizations and encourage accurate news coverage of Asian Americans.

AAJA, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, was formed in 1981 to encourage Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders to enter the ranks of journalism; to work for fair and accurate coverage of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders; and to increase the number of Asian American and Pacific Islander journalists and news managers.

Nationally, the Media Access Workshops project is made possible through a three-year grant from The New York Times Company Foundation. The framework for this booklet was written and edited in 1986 by AAJA founders Bill Sing and Karen Lee. It was revised in 2005 by Scott Nishimura of the Fort Worth Star-Telegram and Carol Wang of NBC 5 in Dallas and Fort Worth. (That version is available online for download at www.aaja.org/resources/media_access/maHANDBOOK_1.pdf.) Jessie Mangaliman of the San Francisco Chronicle championed the Media Access Workshop project to AAJA chapters around the country.

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AAJA-NC members, including Ellen Sung, Sue Stock, Christine Long, Wendy Yang, Pailin Wedel, Bobbie Eng, Ilin Chen, Renee Chou and Peggy Lim, also contributed revisions to this booklet for the second annual Media Access Workshop in North Carolina in 2007.

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WELCOME

Thank you for joining us for North Carolina's second annual Media Access Workshop. We were overwhelmed by the response to the first workshop and are delighted to keep working with the local Asian American community to improve the diversity of our news.

Our mission as journalists is to provide the most complete, accurate information possible, and diversity is a core part of that mission. But news outlets receive hundreds or thousands of pitches each day, via fax, email, phone, and wire and even from people who walk through the doors.

We don't want great stories to get lost in the shuffle, and that's where you can help. This workshop will give you the skills to approach media organizations, but in the end, we journalists learn at least as much from you as you do from us.

Warmest regards,
Ellen Sung
AAJA National Board Representative
for North Carolina Chapter

Step I

Get to know your local media

Trying to figure out how to get your news story noticed and covered by the news media in your area can be scary. It's hard to know who to contact and what to tell them. And, it's very easy for your story to get lost in the hustle and bustle of an active newsroom.

Use these steps and the tips within them as a guide to getting your news in the news successfully.

Most people want their story covered in the major daily newspapers or on network television or radio. But those outlets generally cater to large general audiences, so your story may have a better chance of getting coverage in a smaller community news outlet, the ethnic media, or in, say, a targeted section of a major newspaper.

The first step is to study as many news outlets as possible and try to get a feel for what makes news at each one. The criteria will vary depending on which news outlet it is.

Try to find out if your local news outlets have reporters who have covered your organization or similar ones. Are there columnists who address topics that your group cares about? Does the paper have standing features, such as calendars or picture pages that focus on community events? Does the news outlet accept guest commentators?

Another key question is who's in charge.

At a big paper, the editor who can run a blurb about your event in the entertainment calendar is probably different than the one who can assign a story about it.

At a minimum, you should be able to get your events listed in the community calendars. These can be published in newspapers, online, or appear in broadcast. Appropriate events run the gamut from dances to workshops but should be of public interest.

Step II

Make your pitch

- The rule in real estate is "location, location, location." In almost all news organizations, it's "local, local, local." If you're promoting an event, email or fax a short news release to local media outlets.
- Start with a subject line that focuses on what's happening locally. News organizations in Charlotte, for example, are unlikely to assign staff to stories that have nothing to do with Charlotte or the Carolinas. And even if your idea is local, it might be overlooked if the subject line doesn't state this specifically. A good headline to a Raleigh news outlet: "Raleigh charities aid tsunami victims." A headline that might be overlooked: "Aid for tsunami victims."
- Start with the news. There's no need for a dissertation on what your group does. Keep your pitch tight, focusing on what's new, trendy, unusual, contrarian, interesting, or significant to the largest number of people. News organizations also love stories that arouse deep emotions that people can identify with: sympathy, hate, fear, humor, love.
- Be aware of the big story. News outlets are always shopping for local angles and follow-up stories on huge events, whether it's a disaster, a sports championship, or a war. If your group is conducting a clothing drive for war refugees, it can provide a "news peg" for an event that likely wouldn't be covered otherwise.

On the other hand, if your story isn't tied to the news, you should avoid big news days. March, for instance, is a tough time to get Triangle reporters interested in local sports, because they are tied up with college hoops.
- Direct your pitches to specific people. If you're unsure what editors or reporters deal with your type of story, call the news outlet, explain the story, and ask who you should direct pitches to. Additionally, most news outlets list key editors on their Web sites. If you're still unsure, address your pitch to "City editor" (for a newspaper), or "Assignment editor" at TV or radio stations.

Step II continued on next page

Step II

Make your pitch (continued)

- If your group has an ongoing need to be in the media, call up the reporters or editors who cover you and offer to stop by or have coffee.
- Include the basics. News outlets need to know the time, date, place, price, contacts, ticket information, and other basics. If you have a prominent speaker or anything else remarkable, mention it prominently. Local news organizations might be interested in interviewing your speaker, so you should set aside time in the agenda for media availability. Follow that up with a call to the news organization, offering time with the speaker.
- Give us time to get there. If you're holding a news conference, give us one or two days' notice, if possible. Weekday mornings are best. The later in the day, the more pressing the deadlines. Nighttime events make it difficult for newspaper reporters to meet deadlines for the next day's paper. However, if your event is visual, such as a public demonstration, consider holding it in the evening when TV news is airing, so the event can be carried live. In general, staffing is light on weekends, making it difficult to cover anything but the most pressing and interesting stories.
- Be ready. If you issue a news release, you or somebody else in your organization should be readily available to answer calls about it, particularly if you believe the news is strong enough to merit immediate coverage. If your event is a speech, have copies of it for reporters. If you are publicizing a service, be ready to respond to demand for it. If you are calling attention to your controversial stand on an issue, be prepared to deal with opposition. Good reporters will present opposing views on any controversial topic.
- Be persistent and follow up. Remember, news organizations can receive thousands of pitches every day. It's okay to follow up your pitch with a call to see if the editor or reporter received it, and to press your case. Don't be discouraged or argumentative if your idea doesn't fly. Your news outlet might turn it down today simply because staff time is taken up by other assignments. Be positive, and look for more ways to pitch your organization to the news media.

Step II continued on next page

Step II

Make your pitch (continued)

Press release example 1

Here's one example of a press release a company might offer to the media.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CARMAX TO OPEN CAR BUYING CENTER IN RALEIGH
Second Store of its Kind Exclusively Focused on
Buying Customer Cars

RICHMOND, Va. (February 28, 2007)—CarMax, Inc., (NYSE: KMX), the nation's largest retailer of used cars, will open a second Car Buying Center exclusively dedicated to buying cars from customers. The Raleigh CarMax Car Buying Center will be located at 3809 Capital Boulevard and is expected to open this spring. The retailer's first Car Buying Center is located in Atlanta, Georgia.

"The CarMax Car Buying Center will provide a free appraisal of your vehicle, an important piece of information for anyone starting the car-buying process," said Tom Folliard, president and chief executive officer of CarMax. "At CarMax, we do not adjust the value of your trade-in based on what car you are buying; we separate the appraisal and buying process." CarMax provides a written cash offer for the vehicle good for 7 days or 300 miles.

"One of the benefits of selling your car to CarMax is that you don't have to deal with the hassles of finding a buyer, negotiating the price, and handling all of the legally required paperwork to sell your car to an individual," Folliard said.

More than 50 percent of the vehicles CarMax retails are bought through the customer appraisal process. Vehicles purchased from customers that don't meet CarMax's quality standards are sold at wholesale auctions.

"We are the only national retailer that specializes in buying cars from customers without requiring a purchase," Folliard said. "We are opening our second CarMax Car Buying Center to determine the potential success of having a store totally dedicated to buying cars from customers. Increasing the number of cars we buy from customers will help us become more self-sufficient in supplying our inventory and less reliant on car auctions."

Step II continued on next page

Step II

Make your pitch (continued)

CarMax's car buying experts have appraised more than 5 million cars nationwide and use a wide range of information, along with a thorough examination of your vehicle, to determine its fair market value.

About CarMax

CarMax, a FORTUNE 500 company, and one of the FORTUNE 2007 "100 Best Companies to Work For" for the third consecutive year, is the nation's largest retailer of used cars. Headquartered in Richmond, Va., CarMax currently operates 77 used car superstores in 36 markets. CarMax also operates seven new car franchises, all of which are integrated or co-located with its used car superstores. During the twelve month period ended November 30, 2006, the company sold 323,570 used cars, which is 94% of the total 342,482 vehicles the company retailed during that period. For more information, access the CarMax website at www.carmax.com.

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Media Contacts:

Lisa Van Riper, Assistant Vice President, Public Affairs, Office (804) 935-4594

Trina Lee, Public Relations Manager, Office (804) 747-0422 ext. 4197

Good things about this release:

- The title shows quickly that the story is of local importance and also national importance because it's the second of its kind.
- The news is told quickly and concisely.
- The "About CarMax portion is at the end of the release.
- Contact info is included, plus a Web site address.

Things that were missing:

- There was no cell phone number or after-hours contact number.
- There was no art included with the release (even a logo would have been good).

Step II continued on next page

Step II

Make your pitch (continued)

Press release example 2

Here's a sample press release from a local cultural association.

Triangle Area Chinese American Society (TACAS)
P.O. Box 1041, Cary, NC 27512

January 15, 2007
Contact: Cyndy Yu-Robinson
(919) 625-1207

COMMUNITY NEWS: Chinese New Year Festival coming to Triangle

RALEIGH—Fragrant foods, antique costumes, a colorful lion that jumps and dances...the Chinese American community is preparing for the Triangle's largest Chinese New Year Festival on February 17. This year's festival will be held at the State Fairgrounds, Kerr Scott Building, on Blue Ridge Road, in Raleigh, from 10:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m.

An anticipated audience of 4,000 people will enjoy dragon and lion dances, Chinese choral, instrumental dance and martial arts performances by adults and children, exhibits about Chinese customs, meals for sale, and interactive activities for children including Chinese knotting, paper-folding, and yo-yo lessons.

"It's with tremendous pride that we share the festive and charming Chinese culture with all of our Triangle friends," says organizer Vicky Yang, president of the Triangle Area Chinese American Society (TACAS) and the Festival's organizer.

Chinese New Year - the Year of the Pig in the Chinese zodiac - officially begins on Feb. 18, 2007; the Festival takes place on the Eve before New Year's Day. General admission to the Festival is \$5 in advance and \$8 at the door. Children 6 and under enter for free. Tickets are available at Asian grocers, restaurants, and several Chinese language schools through the day before the Festival. For more information on Chinese New Year traditions and the Festival, visit www.nctacas.org. To observe rehearsals or obtain photos, contact External_Affairs@tacas.org.

Step II continued on next page

Step II

Make your pitch (continued)

Good things about this release:

- The title demonstrates local news immediately and tells the news.
- Contact information is at the top, along with a date.
- Attendance figure is given to drive home the magnitude of the event, along with some description of visual things that will happen.
- Images of previous years' festivities (not included here) were attached with the e-mailed release.
- Information about cost of admission and Web site are given.

Things that would make the release better:

- A second phone number or contact person would be helpful.
- Some more information about Chinese New Year and this particular festival might help make the case stronger.
- The release could have indicated other Chinese community leaders to speak with for the story.

Step III

Preparing for an interview

If a reporter schedules an interview with you or your group, here's how to get ready:

- Designate a spokesman or woman. If television news is interested in your story, make sure you have an articulate, succinct spokesperson. Time for live interviews is typically less than two minutes, and there's no chance to do it over again. If you appear on TV news, look at the reporter, not at the camera. Make sure your hair is neat, your face is not shiny, and your jacket, shirt and necktie don't have small patterns that can look bad on camera.
- Understand the scope. If the interview is scheduled for several hours or days later, ask the reporter what the story's about and how detailed you will have to be in your responses. This will help you prepare.
- Be conversational. To increase your chances of being quoted, engage in a conversation with the reporter. Don't try to use email to replace an interview. It's too easy to use email to give limited answers, and that can frustrate the reporter and possibly lead him or her to drop you out of the story, if you're not essential.
- Do your homework. Prepare evidence and examples. If you're caught off guard by a question, don't answer off the cuff. Tell the reporter you don't know the answer, and offer to get the information later.
- Be concise. In the interview, state your key points first. Cite interesting examples involving real people.
- Don't assume the reporter knows anything about the topic. If you're not sure the reporter understands the key points, restate key points for emphasis. Volunteer important information that the reporter hasn't asked about.
- Honesty is the best policy. If you can't answer a question, say so, and above all, don't lie! Vague or dishonest answers will hurt your credibility with the reporter and his or her editor, particularly if bad information appears in print or on the air. Vague and dishonest answers will also hurt your credibility with everybody who knows the truth.

Step IV

Thinking with all your senses

Good stories and good “art” (pictures and graphics) make for good play. Often stories with good pictures and graphics get higher billing because there is something visual for readers to look at. Pictures and sound are particularly important if you’re trying to get your story on TV or radio. The same is true for multimedia on the Web, which television, print media and radio are all pursuing.

- Arrange access for visuals. If there’s anything that’s particularly visual about your story, include that in your pitch and be ready to help news organizations arrange what’s necessary.
- Send art with the release. If your release quotes somebody extensively, include a picture of that person. If sending it electronically, call ahead to the news outlet to find out how the picture should be formatted. Typically, a 300 dpi jpeg of about 5 inches along the longest dimension will suffice. Another option: Instead of sending photos or graphics, you can include a link to your organization’s web site. Include permission to use art off the web site, and make sure the art can be reproduced in large enough size.
- Think about what makes a good photograph. Action and reaction are key to good photographs. With the exception of some people portraits, newspapers will generally reject ideas to “stage” photos, so make sure you can offer an opportunity for a photojournalist to come shoot an event or activity as it is actually happening. Think about other things that make a good photo, such as emotion (winning the lottery or losing a loved one), a suspenseful story (will the woman be able to bring her dog with her as she flees New Orleans?) and aesthetics such as color, light, patterns and lines that may be visually striking.

Step III continued on next page

Step IV

Thinking with all your senses
(continued)

Think about what makes a good radio, TV or online audio/video story:

- An interview where someone’s personality comes through.
- Ambient sound that is unusual or beautiful, e.g. stories about musical groups beg for sound clips.
- Sounds from an unusual place, e.g. the echoes of a prison cell when someone slams the cell doors.
- A story with action or movement, for example, about a dance group or a sports team.
- A story where someone demonstrates how to do something.
- A story where there’s a lot of visual emotion.

Tips

Avoid these pitfalls

- Many groups invite journalists to meetings. While this may be resourceful for a writer, a photograph of a meeting or a ribbon cutting is rarely visually interesting.
- Some events happen every year. Enticing editors to cover it again can be a challenge. Think about how to pitch the story through a new lens. For example, The Washington Post did a long story on Chinese New Year telling it through one of the dragon dancers. They followed him through his training and preparations to the final performance.

A few other tips

- When sending out a release for an event that lasts for a few hours or more, try to specify what time the most interesting sounds and sights might occur. It will help ensure the best photograph is taken or most exciting footage is captured.
- If a story involves children, make sure each child already has their parent's permission to be in the news.
- If the story is about something that has already happened in the past, try to provide your own photographs or video of the event.
- If the event has yet to happen, consider offering access to activities that demonstrate preparations for the event.
- For any event to which you invite TV, make sure spokespersons or other people that news crews can talk to are readily available.

Other strategies

New conferences and demonstrations

There are instances in which you'll want to do more than issue a news release.

News conferences can be convenient, because they let you or your spokesperson talk to all news media at once. This can be especially useful for breaking stories, when your spokesperson doesn't have time to answer individual calls from reporters throughout the day.

Another advantage of news conferences is that they sometimes force news outlets to cover your story out of fear that their competition will get the story. News conferences are also visual in nature and useful for television news.

Public demonstrations - rallies, pickets, sit-ins and the like - are essentially more dramatic forms of news conferences. They can also provide sources for human-interest interviews.

Some risks apply to both news conferences and demonstrations. Overuse lessens the chance they will be covered in the future and can create bad relations with news outlets.

In most cases, however, your story pitch probably won't warrant a news conference. You're more likely to end up making a pitch directly to a reporter or editor.

Sponsorships

Another way to expand your message is to try and seek sponsorship for your organization from local media outlets. Sponsorships can bring free advertising. Backing from a local paper or TV or radio station may also boost your group's credibility among your larger community. (See the "Newsroom Contacts" supplement, included in your folder, for some local sponsorship contacts.)

After you find out who controls sponsorships at the news outlet you are interested in, get information on deadlines and application procedures.

Other strategies continued on next page

Other strategies

(continued)

Letters to the Editor

These are by far the quickest, easiest and most widely used method for ordinary citizens to get their ideas published. Most newspapers, including the large metropolitan dailies, are quite eager to publish them, particularly because readership studies indicate they are very popular with readers. Here are some tips for writing letters:

- Include your name, address and phone number, because few papers will run anonymous letters.
- Keep your letter short and to the point. Many papers have a word limit. Find out what it is.
- Make your letter newsworthy. It can be on any topic that's of interest to readers; it doesn't have to be in response to a story the paper has just run.
- A catchy, humorous letter can be more effective and more likely to run than a straight, dry one.
- Stick to the facts and the issues, and avoid personal attacks.
- If you're responding to something the paper has just published, write promptly to increase the chances your letter will be published.
- Avoid sending the same letter to more than one publication. Opinion pages editors are less likely to run letters that have already appeared in other publications.
- Check your paper's opinions page for the proper way to address letters and send them. (See also the "Newsroom Contacts" supplement included in your folder.)

Other strategies continued on next page

Other strategies

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Requesting a correction or clarification

Reporters, like other human beings, aren't perfect. We make mistakes and if those mistakes are due to inaccurate, biased or incomplete reporting, our editors want to know. If you believe a story has been mishandled, here are some suggestions on how to lodge complaints:

- Determine exactly what's wrong with the story. Is it inaccurate, biased, or incomplete? Prepare evidence to back up your argument. You might want to suggest other sources that would provide a more complete, accurate account.
- Call the reporter first. State your problem, but don't assume the reporter was at fault. It could have been the fault of one of the editors who handled the story.
- If you believe the story was inaccurate or misleading, ask for a correction or clarification.
- You can write a letter to the editor or guest editorial to the newspaper. If the problem was with a TV station, you can ask to go on the air.
- If these methods fail and you believe the problem is recurring, you can call the city or supervising editor, managing editor, executive editor, or publisher at the newspaper. If the paper has one, you can also call the readers' advocate or ombudsman, whose job it is to receive and assess complaints. At TV stations, try the news director or station manager.

Other strategies continued on next page

Other strategies

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Community calendars

To share basic information about upcoming events that are open to the public, consider calendar listings. For print media, check the section of the paper you are interested in for instructions about how to submit info.

For broadcast, go to the station's website for instructions. (Also see the "Newsroom Contacts" supplement in your folder for community calendar contacts for some local media.)

Here's a sample community calendar listing:

"ARTSPACE PAINTS FAYETTEVILLE. More than 30 artists working outside and displaying new work, wine tasting, children's activities, live music and more, 2-6 p.m. April 21. Artspace, 201 E. Davie St., Raleigh. Free. 821-2787, www.artspacenc.org/."

A glossary

Media has a language all its own and it helps to understand the terms reporters and editors use when they're talking about stories. This is a partial list.

Ad: A paid advertisement. This compares to a non-paid news placement, which can be anything from a news story to a listing in a community calendar. Except for smaller news outlets, the advertising staff sells advertising, but generally doesn't direct the news content. Similarly, the news staff directs the news content, but doesn't sell advertising.

Angle: The focus of a story that makes it newsworthy.

Art: Pictures, illustrations, and informational graphics. If you're submitting a story pitch, consider proposing art with it. Good art and good stories usually mean good play.

Breaking news: A quickly developing story, such as the tsunami.

Budgets, budget meetings: Budgets are lists of stories that are being planned for publication. News organizations usually schedule a series of budget or news meetings throughout the day at which they decide what's going in the paper or on air.

Bureaus, zone offices: Suburban news offices in major metro areas. News organizations increasingly are opening bureaus to move reporters and editors closer to where their readers live. These bureaus are sometimes referred to as zones.

Centerpiece: A story and art in the middle of a newspaper page or web page. **City desk:** Also sometimes referred to as the assigning desk or metro desk, this is the main newsroom in a news organization. It usually includes reporters who cover police, fire, city hall and other local governments, and schools.

Corrections, clarifications, retractions: When we're wrong, we publish corrections; clarifications, which might include details missing in the original story; and, in rare cases, retractions of entire stories, when the entire underpinning of the story is in question.

Cutline: Caption that accompanies a published picture and describes what's in the picture. If you submit a photograph, you should submit cutline information with it.

Glossary continued on next page

A glossary

(continued)

Editorial: An expression of the opinions of a news outlet or individual. This compares to a standard news story, which is not an opinion. The same people (editorial board) who run the editorial pages of a newspaper generally do not run the news departments.

Features: Stories about people, organizations and companies that aren't necessarily tied to breaking news. The features department of a newspaper typically produces sections such as Life, Home, Food, Arts, Entertainment, and TV.

Follow-up: These stories follow new developments in a story that's already been published or aired, or further develop an aspect of it that the reporter didn't fully pursue in the initial coverage. They're also called folos, or next-day and second-day stories.

Guest column: Any opinion column published in any section of a newspaper that's written by somebody who doesn't work for the organization.

Head or headline: Title given a newspaper story or news release. **Lead (or sometimes, lede):** The first sentence of a story, written to catch the reader's interest by telling the most important facts.

Mainbar: This is the lead story in a package of stories about the same topic.

Ombudsman: Also sometimes called the reader advocate, this is the newspaper editor who takes complaints from readers and is responsible for communicating that information to the reporters and editors.

Public Service Announcement: Also referred to as PSAs. A free television or radio commercial publicizing nonpolitical services and activities sponsored by non-profit groups.

Sidebar: These are stories that accompany the mainbar in a package of stories about the same topic.

Source: Anybody or any organization that supplies information or news to a reporter.

Wire service: A news gathering organization, such as The Associated Press and Bloomberg News, that provides news to subscribing organizations.

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