

The Sources *Hot*Link

Tips and Practical Ideas to Get Positive News Coverage

Number Twenty-One, Winter 2002

When & How to Hold a News Conference

BY ED SHILLER



Be forewarned. News conferences can be fraught with danger. Demonstrators or hecklers can steal the thunder of your message and grab the spotlight on the 6 o'clock news. A reporter with an axe to grind may dwell on negative issues, which will then be reported by the other journalists in the room. Or your "news" conference may not be sufficiently newsworthy to attract the media.

So before you decide to call a news conference, make sure that the circumstances meet ALL of the three following criteria:

1. The media will require some form of contact with you – to ask questions, to take photographs or video or to interact with a new product or piece of equipment.
2. AND a large number of media want to cover the story.
3. AND the media must cover the story right now – it can't wait until tomorrow.

Unless all three criteria are met, you can satisfy the needs of the media by sending out a news release and setting up one-on-one interviews. This will minimize the risk of losing control and it will give each reporter an opportunity to develop his or her own unique approach to the story.

Room Set-up

If all the criteria are met and the decision is made to proceed with a news conference, then do it right. That means setting up the room to prevent reporters, photographers and videogra-

phers from getting in each other's way. Here's what to do:

1. Put the head table on a raised platform.
2. Place the reporters' chairs in a single block (that is, no centre aisle) with the front row just two or three feet in front of the platform. (This will prevent photographers from rushing directly in front of the platform, where they will obstruct the view of reporters and video camera operators.)
3. Place a long, narrow table along the right or left side of the room, perpendicular to the head table and about three or four feet from the reporters' chairs. If it's a really big news conference, you might want to place a table along the right and left sides of the room. Put a few chairs behind the table or tables.
4. Put a single microphone in front of each person who will speak from the head table, and connect the microphone(s) to audio feed boxes stationed on each of the side tables and on the floor in the back of the room.
5. Set up flood lights for front and back lighting of the head table.

With the room set up in this manner, print reporters can sit in the chairs

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Media Events – Maximizing Your Attendance & News Pick-up

BY MARK LAVIGNE, APR



As the news media becomes more and more saturated with information, particularly in a News Mecca like Toronto, journalists find it increasingly difficult to attend media events.

Here's why.

Electronic highways into newsrooms have enabled a shrinking newsroom workforce to cover more territory because of the concentration of information into databases and the plethora of internal and external wire services. The wide spread adoption of E-mail increases information flow. Working on very short deadlines, most journalists are reluctant to leave their desks for a story.

According to Angus Reid, in a 1998 media poll, journalists get an average of 153 news conference invitations per month, with only 32 percent getting a reporter to attend. Also according to the Angus Reid poll, Canadian news media want spokespeople to come to them – electronically and in person. News conferences are generally too time-consuming in their opinion.

Your task, as a media relations practitioner is to make your story as easy-to-digest as possible and readily accessible via electronic

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News You Can Use

Welcome to the first edition of *The Sources Hotlink* newsletter for 2002. We are adopting a new format – one which we hope will provide you with even more valuable media relations information and advice from some of the industry's leading authorities.

Our theme for this issue is news conferences and media events. PR practitioners Ed Shiller and Mark LaVigne (both members of the Canadian Public Relations Society) provide direction on how to plan for, conduct and maximize the effects of a news conference/media event. We hope you benefit from their instruction.

March will also see the launch of our electronic newsletter. For more information on how you can subscribe, visit our Web site at www.sources.com/hotlink.htm.

We have a lot planned for upcoming issues of *The Sources Hotlink*. Topics to be covered include media training and the broad reaching effects of media convergence. But don't think for a moment this is a one-way communications vehicle. We'd love to hear your comments or suggestions for future issues. Perhaps you have specific questions about media relations practices. If so, send them to me via E-mail (lfenske@sources.com) or by mail – Lynn Fenske, Sources, 489 College Street, Suite 305, Toronto, Ontario M6G 1A5. We'll address your concerns as space and time permit.

Until next time, enjoy your issue of *The Sources Hotlink*.

Sincerely,
Lynn Fenske

Looking for an inexpensive and effective way of getting your message across?

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All the information in *Media Names & Numbers* and *Parliamentary Names & Numbers* is available in mailing list form, on disk, via E-mail, or printed on mailing labels.

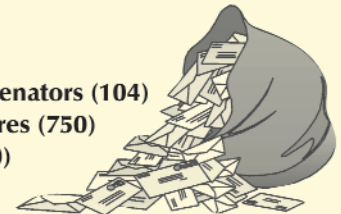
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When and How to Hold a News Conference

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in front of the head table. If they want to record the news conference, they can plug their tape recorders into the audio feed box on the table. Radio reporters can sit with the print reporters or behind the table and also plug their tape recorders into the audio feed box. TV reporters can sit with the print reporters. Photographers can roam along the side aisles, where they won't get in anyone else's way. The video camera operators can set up their cameras behind the reporters' chairs and plug their audio tape recorders into the audio feed box on the floor. They will be able to get an eye-level shot of the speaker (who is perched on the raised platform) over the heads of the seated reporters. And because you've set up the lights, the photographers won't have to use flashes and the video camera operators will not need to turn on the harsh spotlights that jut from the top of their Betacams.

Now everyone – radio, print and TV reporters; photographers, and video camera operators – will have their needs met without getting in each other's hair.

Conducting the Conference

Now that you've set up the room properly you can turn your attention to the main event – conducting your news conference. Here's what to do:

Distribute a prepared media kit

The media kit is an indispensable part of the news conference. It tells your story the way you want it told. It answers many of the questions you anticipate the media will ask. And it provides background information that will add credibility to your messages and gives reporters the opportunity to develop more deeply into the story. A good media kit ought to contain a news release, the full text of any prepared remarks, relevant fact sheets and backgrounders and possibly a photo and bio of the speaker.

Welcome the media

The media are there as your guests; they represent a golden opportunity for getting your key messages across to your vital publics – so treat all media people with respect. Try to make their job easier, and if need be, do it for them. This will give you greater influence over the media's handling of your story. To pro-

vide an effective welcome, set up a table by the entrance. The PR person at the table will greet all arriving reporters, photographers and video camera operators by giving each of them the complete media kit. You may also ask the media people to sign a register or drop their business cards in a jar. But you may not get upset if they refuse. And you may not withhold the media kit.

Many executives and some PR people argue that giving out the media kit before the news conference is a bad idea because “then the reporter might leave without hearing what I have to say.” So what! If the media kit is all that the reporter needs, then why hold the news conference in the first place? Indeed, if all the reporter wants is your media kit, then you will actually have more influence over the published or broadcast news item, since the media kit – upon which the reporter will now rely – tells the story the way you want it told. And finally, when you withhold the media kit until the end of the news conference, you simply irritate the media, make their jobs much more difficult and thereby increase the likelihood that the resulting stories will be inaccurate or biased against you.

Just bear in mind that your purpose is not to get the media to attend your news conference, it is to get positive media coverage.

Start the news conference

When the appointed hour of the news conference arrives, the PR person goes to the head table, briefly thanks the media for coming and immediately introduces the speaker, who then enters the room and walks to the head table. There are two reasons for this walk, as short as it might be. First, it adds a pinch of movement to the usually static news conference (there isn't much dynamism in a talking head), thus increasing the likelihood that the evening news will carry a sound bite. Second, it keeps the speaker under wraps until the start of the news conference. You don't want the speaker informally dodging probing questions from reporters milling around room. Once introduced, the speaker delivers a three to five minute speech that contains the news and key messages that prompted the news conference. He or she then

opens the floor to questions. The speaker recognizes a reporter, answers the question, recognizes the same reporter again if there is a follow-up question, answers that and then recognizes the next reporter to raise a hand.

Ending the Conference

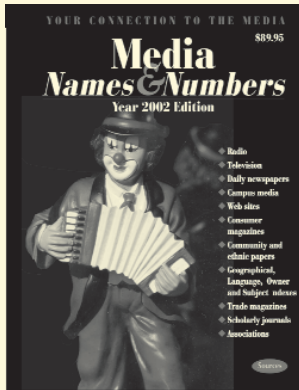
Ideally, a news conference ends itself. That is, the reporters just stop asking questions. When this happens, the spokesperson – or the PR person, if he or she is acting as “host” or “hostess” – thanks everyone for attending.

Life, however, isn't always so accommodating. A reporter or two may continue on the same topic, question after question, in what seems like an endless merry-go-round. If that happens, the person acting as host or hostess should politely say that the hour is late and there is time for just a few more questions. That in itself may stop the flow of repetitive questions, in which case the host or hostess just thanks everyone for attending. If not, allow two or three more questions, then thank everyone for attending.

At this point, many of the reporters will make for the nearest exit. But for a few, the formal end of the news conference is just the beginning of the information-gathering process. That's because the really good reporters will wait until after the news conference ends to pose their most poignant questions. After all, why would a creative reporter want to share his or her unique approach to the story with other less enterprising but nonetheless competing reporters?

Well, they won't. And the result is the “scrum” – that mad dash to the podium to catch the spokesperson before he or she disappears into the shadows. Since trying to outrun the media will only produce embarrassing footage for the 6 o'clock news, the best thing is to stand your ground, greet the oncoming reporters with a relaxed and accommodating smile and remain until all their questions are answered. Regard the scrum as nothing more than a natural extension of the news conference.

Ed Shiller is President of Toronto-based Shiller & Associates Inc., which specializes in media training, media relations, crisis communications and strategic public relations. For more details, visit his Web site www.edshiller.com or contact him directly by phone (416-496-2243) or E-mail (shiller@edshiller.com).



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Media Events

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communications. When your story is highly visual through the presence of celebrity spokespersons or a particular location or geography, then plan your event with the following in mind:

- Find out what is going on before picking your date and time – pay attention to the news and advanced notification of news events (i.e. www.newswire.ca);
- Make it downtown, as close to news media outlets as you can;
- Make it late morning or early afternoon, to enable media to get there on their rounds after their morning story meetings and before late afternoon deadlines;

Capitalize on the visuals by hiring your own photographer and/or a videographer

Hiring a photographer/videographer enables you to provide media-ready images to news outlets or post them online for access to journalists who are unable to attend your event. Having your own images also permits you to document the event in your own fashion and provides a permanent archival record for future reference. Hire someone already trusted by the news media, perhaps a freelancer who works for a wire service or news organization. Services provided by well known and trusted companies such as CP Photo Assignment Services, News Reach, and Canada News Wire can either be the ultimate insurance policy in case few to no media show up, or can expand an event's media coverage.

The need for speed is paramount. You should have the final photography and videography into news media hands by 3:30 or 4:00 p.m. at the latest. Let them know by voice and E-mail that it's coming. At the event itself, try to engineer a great shot. Trust the news photographer you have hired – they know their business. Move the chosen photo on a paid wire service. Write a tight caption. And have an electronic version ready to E-mail to media on demand as well.

Have BETA quality b-roll shot, and if you have budget and time, edited properly and in media hands by the 4:00 p.m. deadline. Have hard copy accompany it,

and ideally, a CD containing the whole news kit in electronic form. Make sure you have good clips of all the spokespersons involved, capture the ambiance of the event, include wild sound and make the tape short – less than eight minutes.

Here's what you can expect to pay: B-roll ranges from \$2,000 to \$10,000. Mainstream news distribution outlets charge about \$10,000 for edited B-roll without satellite transmission. Photography can range from \$500 to \$1,000. With photowire transmission, add \$500.

Another tip to make things easier for the news media – create a CD ROM media kit that contains as much of the background information as possible in electronic form – including high resolution digital images. CD ROM production is about \$1,000, including creative and duplication/screen printing. However, do have at least a few paper-based media kits available. Some news media still like paper!

Webcasting is a way to reach not only news media, but also the public including many of your key stakeholders. Many variations can be offered, depending on budget. A completely live webcast, with video, can cost thousands. But you can simply post still images quite quickly and relatively inexpensively if you have on-line access from the event or nearby, and shoot high-resolution drive visitors to your Web site, helping generate important site visits and page views.

News events also offer another important aspect beyond generating news coverage. You can create events that also include customers and/or employees. And there is always the intangible effect of a successful news event. It raises morale within the company. There's nothing more exciting for employees than to see their company in the news in a positive sense. And good news can go a long way in helping the HR folks to promote a healthy work environment.

Mark LaVigne, APR, is a media relations and media training specialist who practiced broadcast journalism for five years and has spent the last 12 years in PR. He can be reached at mark.lavigne@sympatico.ca or 905-841-2017.

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