

Establishing relationships with media

Free-media promotion is one of the greatest promotion opportunities for your church. Free-media exposure can give your church a tremendous amount of exposure and credibility within your community. This helps build community awareness of your church, its activities, its minister and its people. These are important factors in attracting new visitors and possibly new members to your church.

The key to a successful free-media promotion is establishing relationships with editors, news editors and reporters.

1. Study the media outlet you want to contact. What's the target audience? What's the editorial viewpoint? What stories do they cover? Do they have a large or small staff? What are the stories they've run over the past year? By knowing the answers to these questions before you call, you'll be able to convince the staff your news will interest them.
2. Give your target media a call or two before you send them information for a story. Find out who covers the area in which your release should appear and then visit with them generally about your church and their beat. Reporters are most likely to work with people they know, trust and like.
3. Know your media outlets' deadlines. Get your information to them in plenty of time before deadline to give them the maximum opportunity to use your information.
4. Make sure you edit carefully your press release or press packet. Print editors and reporters are sticklers for grammar, spelling and punctuation. Make sure your facts are straight because the media will find out if they are not.
5. Make your message clear. While reporters like toys, such as free pens, coffee mugs and notepads, don't let those items overshadow your message. Many churches won't even have these types of trinkets, and they are certainly not necessary to get attention for your news release.
6. Be persistent. Don't be afraid to contact the reporter again if you haven't seen your story in the paper, heard it on the air or seen it on the news. Calmly and professionally state your case for why your information is of value to the entire community. Reporters will respect your tenacity, as long as it doesn't become badgering.
7. Be realistic. Understand where you fall on the reporter's list of responsibilities. If it's a small news staff, then the reporter is not just covering news related to churches and religion. The reporter probably has three or four other beats to keep track of as well. If your media release is not time-sensitive, you may take a backseat to other more timely news.
8. Be sure to check your contacts frequently and keep your contact information updated. In newspaper and radio, news directors and reporters may change frequently. Nothing loses you respect faster than to contact the station or newspaper and ask for someone who hasn't worked there in nearly a year.
9. Keep the contact information where everyone in the church can have access to it. You may not be the only one who needs to contact the media, so it is a good idea to keep the listing where others who might also promote your church can find it.
10. Don't just contact the editor or news director when you need a story. Be sure to maintain contact and offer assistance throughout the year. Maybe your pastor has insights on the political situation in Afghanistan or the Middle East. A local angle on a national story could provide your church with additional free-media opportunities.
11. When an editor, reporter or news director uses your information, follow-up with a simple thank-you note to show your appreciation and offer assistance in the future. Thank them for their efforts and suggest working with them again. Media professionals are people, too, and they appreciate recognition for what they do.