

The Charity First Series

EFFECTIVE MEDIA RELATIONS FOR CHARITIES

What journalists want and how to deliver it

Becky Slack



 **CharityComms**


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The Charity First series aims to provide practical and straightforward guidance on the challenges confronting charity operations today, with fundraising in the spotlight. Its individual subjects range from those concentrating on the UK and Ireland to non-profit issues in the EU and other jurisdictions, from traditional to digital fundraising and from basic help for those just entering the third sector to specialist areas for the more experienced.

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What journalists want and how to deliver it

Becky Slack

For dad. The best storyteller I know.

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Welcome from CharityComms

UK charities play a vital role in our society. With an annual spend of nearly £40bn, the sector provides a vast range of activities and services which, in the most general sense, all aim to improve the wellbeing of society. However, for a number of reasons, the sector as a whole is not always well understood by the public, nor always applauded for its work or its methods.

For individual charities – often reliant on voluntary contributions for their very survival – public perceptions of their value are especially important: every charity needs to be able clearly to communicate how it's pursuing its mission and why it uses the methods it does. Indeed, in many cases, effective communications is itself a crucial part of the charity's mission.

As an extension of the general communication strategy, every charity should also have a clear media strategy – this will focus, on the one hand, on deciding what key messages are to be communicated to which audiences and, on the other, on understanding the roles of media professionals – and making them your friends.

I hope this book helps you develop such a strategy. It should give you a better understanding of how to make the case for media work; of what journalists want from charities; and of how you can make the most of your resources, however limited, to deliver it.

Vicky Browning, director, CharityComms

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INTRODUCTION

Charities' relationship with the media

As I write this guide, the charity sector is reeling from a seemingly unprecedented amount of negative media coverage. From fundraising techniques to salaries, many questions have been raised about the way in which charitable organisations operate. While some claim that the media are specifically targeting charities in a bid to weaken them, others believe the negative coverage is the consequence of years of failure to explain the realities of running a charity in a modern world. Either way, charities have been shown to be ill-prepared to cope when coverage turns sour.

Running alongside this is the sense that charities do not get the positive coverage they need and deserve, despite the sector containing a wealth of knowledge, experience and insight into the world's most pressing social challenges. Indeed, of the 167,000 charities currently registered in the UK, very few are recognised as household names.

Of course, there are some charity PR teams that work very effectively with the media, delivering great content in a way that meets both parties' needs – and we will meet some of these throughout this guide. However, for every charity PR that works well with journalists there are countless others that do not. My own experiences of working with charities, and those of my journalist colleagues, show that there are many ways in which charity PR and media relations could be improved. For instance, many charities: lack understanding as to what makes a good news story; are unable to provide strong, interesting and relevant case studies and; operate within slow and bureaucratic internal processes that result in missed deadlines. Most frustratingly of all, when the going gets tough, many have a tendency to stick their heads in the sand and hope it will all just go away (it won't).

None of these issues are insurmountable. With the right training and resources, many more charities can enjoy fruitful relationships with the media.

By helping charities to navigate through the complex media maze, this guide aims to contribute to addressing this issue, albeit in a small way.

I hope you enjoy the read.

Becky Slack, managing director, Slack Communications.

See About the Author (p112).

A note before you start reading:

The ‘media’ can mean many things to many people. As with ‘charity’ it is not one homogeneous group of journalists and outlets. It includes newspapers, television channels, individual radio programmes, blogs, online magazines and other digital sources – the size, scope and objectives of which vary enormously.

For the purposes of this guide, I use the term ‘media’ to mean those individuals who are tasked with reporting on what is happening in the world, be it via print, broadcast or online – unless explicitly stated otherwise.

It does not include ‘social media’ – as in Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and other digital channels that allow two-way interaction. Content can be posted on these channels by anyone with an internet connection. This content then can be commented on and shared by others. While these channels can be a good source of news stories and case studies, they are not the sole preserve of journalists and for that reason when this guide refers to ‘media’ it does not mean ‘social media’. For more on social media, see Chapter 9 or see the blogs and guides available at www.charitycomms.org.uk.

You will also be introduced to Amber Valley Angels. This is a fictional charity that is used throughout the guide to help illustrate activities and provide context.

Media strategy: the key elements

When time, money and resources are tight, it’s important you understand what you want to achieve with your PR activities and why. Being strategic is vital as this will enable you to present a consistent message that is heard by the right people at the right time.

Working through the strategic pillars below before embarking on media activity will help you and your organisation decide what you want to achieve and why. It can also help remove duplication of effort, enable resources to be directed precisely where they are needed, and avoid wasting time and money.

The strategic pillars are:

1. Objectives

What do you want to achieve and why? Do you want to raise awareness? Strengthen your reputation within a key area? Promote a fundraising campaign or petition? What does PR success look like to you and your organisation?

2. Target audience

Who do you want to talk to and why? As we will discuss in Chapter 2, there is no such thing as the general public. Be specific about who it is you want to engage with and what their information needs are, and then target your PR activities accordingly.

3. Tone of voice

What kind of personality do you want to convey? Are you fun and energetic? Authoritative and serious? The impression you want to create among your target audience will help determine the type of media outlet you want to work with, what you want to say to them and how you say it.

4. Key messages

What do you want people to think, feel or do? Your key messages will help explain your organisation and what it does, why this is important and the difference you make. See Chapter 3.

5. Content

Central to the success of your PR activity will be the quality of the stories you have to offer journalists. What case studies do you have? Do you have access to data that will help evidence your opinion or your work? See Chapter 4.

6. Media training

Knowing what you want to say is one thing. Having a spokesperson who can communicate this clearly and concisely, particularly under times of pressure, is another. Media training can help iron out any creases. See Chapter 7.

7. Crisis comms

Preparation is key if a crisis is to be averted or minimised. Understanding your strengths and weaknesses, and having a plan as to what to do if it all goes wrong, are essential to protecting your reputation. See Chapter 8.

8. Managing expectations

While you may understand the opportunities and challenges associated with PR, your senior management team and trustee board may not. Helping them to understand what is realistically achievable is important if you are to satisfy expectations (see page 101).

9. Monitoring and evaluation

Knowing what worked and what didn't will help you understand which areas of your strategy to change and to do more of, and will provide you with valuable insight to build the case for future investment. See Chapter 10.

1

OBJECTIVES: WHAT DO YOU WANT TO ACHIEVE AND WHY?

Why work with the media?

Page 3 and charity are unlikely bedfellows, but in 2014 a partnership with *The Sun* worked a treat for the breast cancer awareness charity, CoppaFeel! Its bold PR campaign, which used the newspaper's glamour models to encourage readers to check their breasts more regularly, got results – after eight months women were four times more likely to check their breasts than before and at least six women had cancer diagnosed as a result of the campaign¹.

Elsewhere, following the *Daily Mail* telephone fundraising exposé in July 2015, where it was alleged that overly aggressive tactics were being used to coerce old and vulnerable people into giving money, charities chose to put their use of this technique on hold, resulting in the loss of hundreds of jobs and many thousands of pounds to good causes. The government also held a review of self-regulation of fundraising and various charity sector leaders were hauled in front of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee to explain their actions both of which resulted in new rules being introduced.

The media has reach and it has influence. This is why it offers such value to charities. Whether a charity wants to raise public awareness of an issue, highlight its successes, campaign for change, or build trust and confidence both in its own operations and those of the sector more widely, the media can be a very useful tool. It can also be dangerous and risky – as the *Daily Mail* example above demonstrates.

Tapping into the benefits and tackling the challenges is easier said than done, especially where cynical and time-pressed journalists are concerned. Successful media relations require a combination of skill, resources, good relationships – and a whole lot of luck.

Understanding how the media works

To secure the coverage they want and need, charities first need to understand journalism. As such our journey starts in the newsroom.

Charities are not the only organisations where resources are stretched.

¹ Coppafeel (<https://coppafeel.org/>)

The media has also experienced vast reductions in income, resulting in job losses and smaller budgets. Recognising the pressures and demands of the media will help you to understand the requests journalists make and the story ideas they will pick up.

There are more than 31,000 journalists working for more than 15,000 publishers and broadcasters, across more than 9,000 different titles, be these television news channels, national and regional newspapers, lifestyle magazines, or specialist hobby and trade publications. The value of the media is currently estimated to be £60bn each year to the British economy. Some £280m of this comes from magazines and periodicals, and £186m from newspapers. The remaining 99 per cent is from the plethora of broadcasters and online news and magazine websites. Each are influential in their own right: 75 per cent of people access news via television; 41 per cent of people access their news online via websites and mobile apps, including social media channels such as Twitter and Facebook², although this latter figure is growing all the time as smartphones and tablets become more prevalent.

The media is a white, male-dominated industry. Some 94 per cent of British journalists are white. Women are hugely under-represented; only 35 per cent of the *Observer*, *Daily Mail* and *Express* teams are female and just 25 per cent of the *Independent* team are women³. Britain has only ever had two female editors of a daily broadsheet newspaper – Rosie Boycott was editor of the *Independent* for three months in 1998 while more recently Katharine Viner was appointed as editor-in-chief of the *Guardian* after Alan Rusbridger stepped down. The tabloids have fared reasonably better thanks to Eve Pollard, Tina Weaver, Dawn Neesom and Rebecca Brooks, among others, but even so female editors are still a rare breed among the red tops.

It is a hugely competitive space. Most journalists are constantly on the hunt for the next big story, the front-page headline that their rival has missed or found too late, or the nugget of information that is going to turn their feature into one that will keep readers hooked.

The pressure that this competition creates is heightened all the more as a result of the large workload and tight deadlines most journalists are given. The internet has a lot to answer for here. Print sales have slumped⁴

² PPA

³ New Statesman

⁴ ABC

by more than half a million over the past year, and publishers have yet to figure out how to make money online. As a result, this has led to a large number of redundancies. As this book goes to print, many journalists are discovering if they have lost their job as the *Independent* moves to a digital-only format. In 2014, the BBC alone made over 500 journalists redundant⁵ while there have been numerous stories about Trinity Media journalists from around the country losing their jobs. At the same time, the 24/7 rolling news agenda demands a constant stream of content. Therefore, those journalists who are left have to do a whole lot more with far fewer resources.

While this situation can create challenges for those people attempting to pitch stories (see page 53), it can also create opportunities. The immediacy and volume of content that needs to be produced can be overwhelming, and journalists and editors frequently look to outsiders for help. This can provide openings for charity PRs – particularly those that can find a new angle on a current story, can quickly turn around a relevant blog or multimedia content, and have extensive social media networks around which they can also share content.

Journalists – who does what?

The number of full-time staff journalists that a media outlet employs varies enormously from one publication to the next. *Time* magazine, for example, has around 7,500 overall staff, several hundred of whom will be on the editorial team. But *Time* is not typical. It is an international news magazine with the huge budget and huge staff it needs to fulfil its aim of in-depth global news coverage. The emphasis is on writing and reporting with high-quality photography and graphics by way of illustration. The same applies to the BBC, which at the last count had around 800 journalists at its disposal – covering its 14 channels, nine radio stations and vast internet presence. In cases such as these, journalists will often have more stories at their disposal and more time to pull their stories together and can therefore be pickier over the content they choose to run, meaning charities will have to work much harder to secure coverage.

At the other end of the spectrum you will find magazines and broadcasters with much smaller teams to call upon. Most trade magazines, for example, will have an editorial team of one, two if they are lucky – which is responsible for the entire editorial output, both print and digital.

⁵ BBC

They will decide on what content should run and will do all of the commissioning, editing and some writing. A freelance budget will rarely be available, therefore editors will be reliant upon contributors willing to write for free. This is where charity PRs can make themselves indispensable by providing a regular flow of suitable ideas and content.

More commonly, however, media outlets – whether they are print, digital or broadcast – will have a skeleton editorial staff, supplemented by freelancers. To find out how many staff a magazine has, check the mast-head or flannel panel (found within the magazine's pages) – these will reveal the writers, editors, etc. who work on it. In contrast, newspapers and broadcasters do not usually publish a staff list, although their rolling credits, websites and Wikipedia can be a useful source of information. Paid-for services such as Gorkana and PR Newswire also offer a database of contacts (more on this on page 63). All of this information will help identify who to pitch story ideas to.

A crucial point to remember is that the smaller the magazine, the more blurred the boundary between tasks performed by different members of staff. On some magazines, for example, everyone may take a turn at subbing, proofing, commissioning or writing. However, as a general rule of thumb...

Print publications

Editor/editor-in-chief: The most senior person on the team and the one with responsibility for its entire editorial output. Therefore, likely to be the busiest (and most stressed). They will not only decide upon the direction of the editorial but will often write and edit content and make sure it runs to time and to budget. They are also the public face of the publication so will be required to be at meetings, conferences and events – possibly even television and radio appearances. Only pitch to the editor if the magazine is small with few staff. For larger publications, your focus should be on the deputy, assistant, features and commissioning editors (see below for details).

Deputy editor: Often more hands-on than the editor, they will share some or all of the day to day tasks of the editor, with a key role in forward planning, commissioning and hiring.

Assistant editor/associate editor: Senior editors who in some cases will have responsibility for a particular section of the magazine.

Contributing editor: Probably freelance and will have similar duties to the deputy editor. This tends to be an honorary title that is given to VIP journalists and key influencers who mainly contribute ideas, articles and – importantly – contacts.

Features editor/commissioning editor: Responsible for coming up with story ideas and finding writers to produce them. In some instances they will also write content themselves. Charity PR people would do well to make friends with journalists with this title.

Sub-editor: Responsible for making sure the words fit the page, that house style (see Chapter 6) has been followed, and that all is accurate – grammatically, factually and legally. Will also write headlines and ‘stand firsts’ (introductory paragraphs).

News and feature writers: They do as their job title suggests. Should be the first port of call for news stories and feature ideas. They may have autonomy over which stories run or they may be responsible for pitching the ideas into the wider team. Either way, you should make friends with them.

Publisher: This person is responsible for the finance and strategic planning that support the publication of the magazine. Often will work across multiple titles at the same time.

Sales/Business development: The team to speak to about sponsorship and advertising opportunities.

Digital media

As above but with the additions of:

Online editor: Similar role as ‘editor’ above, but focusing purely on the content of the website, tablet edition and social media channels.

Community manager: They have responsibility for the management of the brand’s online channels, driving and directing community conversation in areas such as lifestyle blogs, latest news articles and products to review, forum areas etc. They will manage content production and work with the

more engaged community users on a one to one basis to ensure a steady flow of conversation that is on brand and on message.

Social producer: As well as being responsible for managing the Twitter and Facebook feeds for a brand, this person will also create content for publication with the intention of growing the follower base and levels of engagement.

Website co-ordinator: A media outlet may have multiple websites or large websites that contain a huge amount of information. The main focus of the website co-ordinator, therefore, is to develop the functionality of webpages and their content whilst working closely with a number of different internal teams including production and web development to ensure that the entire site is working as it should.

Broadcast media

Editor: The editor is responsible for the programme as a whole. They manage the budget, the staff, the talent, check for inaccuracies, influence content decisions. They are also to blame if things go wrong. This role is different to that of ‘video editor’ who is responsible for cutting different shots together to create a story.

Output editor: They work alongside the editor and are responsible for everything that happens on their watch, which may be anything from a day to a couple of hours. They’ll choose the lead story and the running order, choose the guests and the way stories are treated. They will also brief reporters and presenters and give feedback after the programme.

Producer: Similar to an editor, a television producer is a person who oversees all aspects of a television programme. Some producers take more of an executive role, in that they conceive new programmes and pitch them to the television networks but upon acceptance they focus on business matters, such as budgets and contracts. Other producers are more involved with the day-to-day workings, participating in activities such as screenwriting, set design, casting, and directing.

Associate/assistant producers: As above but less senior and usually there to support the producer.

Planner: This person manages the forward planning diary and co-ordinates with the news team to ensure that stories are covered when they happen. Key tools in their armoury are their contacts book and their knowledge of what's happening and when.

Newsreader: This individual will present the news on either radio or television. They are usually journalists who have worked their way up through the ranks. Their job is as much about reading the news as it is about handling situations that go wrong, such as the autocue failing, a guest saying something they shouldn't or losing a live feed mid-way through an interview.

Journalist: Journalists collect, verify and analyse information about news and events and present that information in an accurate, impartial and balanced way, be it live or pre-recorded, on either TV or radio. Sometimes, if they work for large international broadcasters, they may find themselves having to conduct two or more simultaneous live reports around the world.

Director: The director is responsible for supervising the placement of cameras, lights, microphones and props. They will also give cues to presenters, actors and other players.



A day in the life of a tabloid journalist

To build a successful relationship with a journalist it's important to understand the priorities they are working to. **Ashitha Nagesh**, a news reporter for *Metro*, gives a flavour of her day:

It's become a bit of a cliché, but it holds true that as a journalist, no two days are the same. So I will give as full an account as I can of my day today. I was on a morning shift, so I woke up at 5am to get ready and get into the newsroom for 7am. Intermittently, as I'm getting ready I read the *BBC* website. On the way in, I read the paper edition of *The Times* and articles on the *Guardian* app on the tube, and grab a copy of the *Metro* to look at later.

The first thing I do when I get in is quickly scan the wires –

first I look at the Press Association day schedule, then Associated Press and Reuters, then all other agencies. Then, a very quick scan of a news aggregator (I use NewsNow) and the homepages of the *Sun* and *Mirror* websites to see what they're running. In the case of today, I've been working on a slightly longer-running (around a week) piece on a certain extremist who shall not be named. I had to chase up some experts in connection with that, so I sent off a bunch of emails and made a note to myself to call them later.

I was assigned the report on Cilla Black's funeral on my newlist, which I knew was starting at 1pm – so I made a note to start working on that around midday or 12.30pm and had a look for other stories.

My first story was about Donald Trump saying the Pope is an Islamic State target, and that capitalism “done properly” is the answer (somehow). He made the comments in an interview with Chris Cuomo on *CNN* so it was a relatively easy write-up. Later in the day I wrote an article about the murder of Anneli-Marie R in Meissen, Germany, which I wrote about a few days ago but I now had some follow-up information.

I also wrote up two court cases – the sentencing of an elderly paedophile who claimed God had “wiped his memory of the event” because he had forgiven him, and the tribunal hearing of a social worker who was dismissed after asking for her coffee to be made “n***** brown”. On a typical day I will write between seven and nine stories, but today was an exception because the extremism article and coverage of Cilla Black's funeral both took significantly longer to do than your average story.

For Cilla's funeral, I started by writing a primer – around 12 paragraphs – which I set live in the *Metro* content management system with a couple of photos of people arriving and then built on as the service went on. By the end of the service this had grown to around 30 paragraphs, with a mixture of photos, videos and tweets that I'd been collecting as I wrote. I had a third cup of black coffee for lunch, finished work around 3pm and headed home to carry on chasing people about my extremist.

Chapter 1 in a nutshell

- To secure the coverage you want, you need to understand journalism. Only by recognising the pressures and demands of the media can you establish what a journalist wants and what they don't.
- The media is a competitive marketplace and has been subject to extensive budget and staff cuts. This is influencing the speed at which journalists work and the type of content and information they need.
- The immediacy and volume of content that needs to be produced can be overwhelming, and the media frequently looks to outsiders for help. This can provide openings for charity PRs – particularly those that can find a new angle on a current story, can quickly turn around a relevant blog, and have extensive social media networks around which they can share content.
- Different types of journalists have different demands. Understanding the nuances between print, digital and broadcast media should inform your PR strategy and influence your results.

/continues...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Becky Slack has worked for almost 20 years within media, including within television and radio production, print and online B2B and B2C journalism, fundraising, communications and events.

Just over a decade has been spent in and around the charity sector. She has been deputy editor of *Charity Times* magazine, editor of *Professional Fundraising* and publishing editor of *Charity Insight*, and has been a senior fundraiser for the British Red Cross, where she worked across corporate and major donors. In addition, she is a trustee of the Flying Seagull Project, a charitable arts and theatre company that uses play and laughter to improve the lives of sick and disadvantaged children around the world.

Her company, Slack Communications, provides PR and communications advice, support and skills to a range of clients, many of which are charitable organisations. Projects range from writing and implementing on-going national and international PR strategies, to conducting communications audits, to delivering special one-off profile-raising activities, such as rebrands, report launches or events.

In addition, her team writes and edits reports, special supplements and articles for government ministers, membership groups and national publishers on topics as diverse as poverty, housing, food security, investment strategies, political reform and everything else in between. They also deliver regular training sessions on topics such as marketing and communications, working with the media, newsletters and content strategy.

Becky blogs for publications such as *Spears Wealth Management*, *UK Fundraising* and the Slack Communication's own website, and chairs political discussions and debates for the *New Statesman*. She is also an active member of the Women's Equality Party.

When she's not running Slack Communications, Becky loves to cook, travel, hang out with friends and family and, if there is any time left over, she's been known to write the occasional storybook for her friend's children.

For more information, visit www.slackcommunications.co.uk

The Charity First Series

For the full list of titles in the Charity First Series, including titles in preparation, see our [publications list](#).

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