



## **The Freedom Project**

“Because you serve, we serve.”

### **PUBLIC RELATIONS TIP SHEET**

America’s soldiers are at work around the world keeping our country safe. America and the troops need to know that we are proud of them! They need to see the powerful contribution young people are making here at home to keep America strong. Good media coverage can make this possible. This tip sheet provides you with the tools you need to get the media to cover your project!

#### **Contacting Local and Regional Media**

Successful projects require teamwork! As you form your team, assign a “media champion.” While the “media champion” does not do all the work or give all the interviews, they coordinate the work. The media champ should pitch and schedule interviews for others working on the project.

#### **Compile a Media List**

Compile an up-to-date media list with the names, titles, addresses, telephone/fax numbers, and email addresses of every news organization, reporter and editor who wants, and is most likely to use, the materials you send. Ask your school for press lists, introductions, and media support. For example, ask your school office if they will help you fax and mail important information to the media. Local charities like the Boys and Girls Club, the American Red Cross, and the Salvation Army may also have media contact lists. Look them up in the phone book. Call the charity and tell them about your project. Ask them if they can help by sharing a media contact list. Charities often have relationships with the press and may be willing to introduce you to some contacts in the local media!

#### **Who Should Be on Your List?**

- Daily newspapers
- Weekly newspapers
- City & regional magazines
- Television and radio stations
- Cable stations
- Wire services
- Local websites like the Chamber of Commerce and School Board

#### **Contacting the Media**

The media will not come looking for you. YOU must inform the media of your project to receive coverage! If it is possible, make a personal contact to ensure your story is understood. Here are some ways to tell the media about the Freedom Project and your group’s important role in it.

### 1. Develop a Relationship

Take the time between now and your event date to get to know members of the local media. Call and introduce yourself. Ask the reporter for a personal appointment to tell them about your Freedom Project. Bring along any material you have. Be ready to “sell” your project.

### 2. Meet Deadlines

Reporters and editors work under tight deadlines. Learn what they are so you may contact them at their convenience. Most reporters plan schedules far in advance. You too must plan ahead, if you want to be included. Here are some general guidelines:

#### **Morning Newspapers:**

- General news: 4 pm the day before publication
- Late-breaking news: 8 pm the day before publication

#### **Evening Newspapers:**

- General news: anytime, the day before publication
- Late-breaking news: 7-9 am the day before publication

#### **Sunday Newspapers:**

- General news: Saturday, noon
- Section news and features: 5 pm Wednesday before publication. Try for a feature; these are preprinted, so watch your deadline!

#### **Weeklies:**

- Two or three days before publication

#### **Magazines:**

- Lead time is at least three months prior to publication date

#### **Wire Services:**

- Anytime. Weekdays during business hours are best

#### **Television:**

- At least four to six hours in advance of news broadcasts. TV reports tend to be the busiest in the late afternoon. Check-out schedules for talk shows and morning news shows.

#### **Radio:**

- Two hours in advance of newscasts. Radio newsrooms often have hourly deadlines. At smaller stations, reports are busiest in the early morning and afternoon.

### 3. Be Strategic

Target two or three reporters from major media sources that would be “big wins” to have cover the story. If you can get them to cover the story a couple days in advance of the event, most of the smaller media sources will follow.

### 4. What’s News?

When talking to the media about your event, remember that they choose stories based upon these characteristics:

**Timeliness:** Is there a good reason to do the story now? In your case the answer is “yes” for two important reasons. 1) The project is happening soon and you need the public’s support. 2) The project is tied to current events that are important to everyone in your community.

**Human Interest:** Tie your local event to a larger news event or issue that people in your area are discussing like the conflict in Iraq, the deployment of troops, and domestic issues like hunger and the environment.

**Uniqueness:** What makes the event different, surprising or outstanding? Are you doing your project in honor of a local military hero? Are military families a part of your project? Your project is about young people taking a leadership role in your community. This alone, makes your story outstanding!

**Impact:** Does it have an effect on individual young people? Specific families? Can you give examples? Does the event or story affect a large number of people in your community?

**Prominence:** Involving celebrities and local VIPS adds value to a story. The more characteristics you can involve in your story, the greater chance it has of being placed in the media. Focus on the aspects of your story that demonstrate these characteristics when meeting media people.

## 5. The Pitch Letter

The Freedom Project is a “good news” story. The projects are celebrations of the service young people do every day. The news that young people, contrary to many stereotypes, are taking a stand to support the troops and make America strong is something important to tell the world about. Some reporters may not see the Freedom Project this way. They may feel that your event is not newsworthy. That’s why the pitch letter is so important. The pitch letter helps tell a story that is interesting, but is not late-breaking, news. You might want to write one to interest the editors, assignments editors, and broadcast news directors as your first step in making contact. Keep the letter simple and short. Immediately explain why you are writing, then summarize the most important information in one paragraph. Here is an opening paragraph to help you get started:

Dear (name of reporter):

On “date of the project,” hundreds of local students are going to work together to support our troops abroad and keep America strong. During this time of international conflict, young people in this community are joining together to (Describe Your Project). This project is being organized by local students from (name of school) with the help of (name of teacher or adult supervisor). Young people, with the help of Weekly Reader and Champions of Hope, are organizing the similar projects in all 50 states to send a strong message of support to America and the troops.

Explain why the newspaper or station’s audience would be interested and include some of your most newsworthy details. *Always* follow up your letter with a phone call.

## 6. Let Your Fingers Do the Walking

Make follow-up calls within a week of sending your pitch letters. In most cases, the assignment editor decides what is news and assigns stories to reporters. Do not assume the editor/reporter knows anything about The Freedom Project Give your name, organization, and job title immediately and ask if your letter has been received.

Ask if the person is on a deadline; if so, schedule a time to call back, say thank you, and hang up. If the reporter has time to listen, enthusiastically describe your plans. Convey a sense of excitement. Extend an invitation to your event. If the time is convenient, ask him/her to suggest another time to visit the project, preferably before the day of the event. There is always a good story in behind-the-scenes preparations.

## 7. Remember the Editor

Find out the names of your local paper’s editors and write each a letter requesting a meeting. State your goal. Do you want an opinion page piece or more coverage? Be sure to stress the timeliness of the Freedom Project and link it to local and national events/trends. Include background information on your project, contact names, and phone numbers. Follow up with a telephone call

and restate your interest in a meeting. Be courteous and professional.

#### 8. Don't Forget the Weeklies

Weekly newspapers, including shopper's guides, offer more stories of interest to the local community. They are a major source of information for people outside metropolitan areas, and it is usually easier to place stories in these publications. Once published, they can be clipped, copied, and circulated to other news sources, or filed in the scrapbook of information you are keeping about your Freedom Project.

#### 9. And Magazines

Get started ASAP to place a story about your participation in the Freedom Project in local and regional magazines. Most of these magazines can offer more time and space to devote to your story, and you will have a printed product that can be saved and calculated. Stories of interest to magazines would include: profiles of volunteers, interaction between volunteers and clients, the "streams" of service in your locality, why this generation is becoming the "we" not "me" generation, etc. Magazines have a long lead-time – at least three months before the story is published. Check the deadlines and act accordingly.

#### 10. Television

Television is a medium for the eyes, and you must have a visual component to your story to get air-time. The Freedom Project is filled with visual opportunities, so offer TV reporters specific details. Explain what will go on at the site – local youth volunteers interacting with at-risk kids, the elderly, or the homeless, to use just a few examples. Prepare a fact sheet explaining the action for the reporter's voice-over. There are many television programs that are potentially good bets for the Freedom Project coverage – plan ahead with the station. Here are some opportunities to explore.

- Public Affairs Programs
- Talk Shows
- Editorials (usually part of news programs, but planned in advance)
- Public Service Announcement (PSAs)
- Feature Segments of the News (usually planned in advance)

TV news has special requirements. In addition to visual appeal, the story must happen in time for that day's newscasts. Hold your event early in the day if possible. Plan brief and informative comments in advance. Keep answers to questions short. Try to speak in "sound bites" – short but important phrases of no more than 15-20 seconds. Remember you are trying to make a positive impression about something you believe in deeply. Do not ramble with unnecessary information. The interviewer will find a way to ask for more information if it is needed or wanted. If you are asked a negative question, respond briefly with a polite attitude and message, and then go on to the story you want to tell.

#### 11. Radio

More and more radio stations provide air-time for call-in, news and talk shows. They are also a great venue to air public service announcements.

- Call in your story as an actuality, a live interview given over the phone
- Write press releases for on-the-air delivery
- Offer to participate in talk shows
- Distribute public service announcements and ask to participate in community affairs programs.

## **MEDIA ADVISORIES**

The Media Advisory contains the message you want to convey to the media. It is not a news release, but a memo or an outline written in simple who, what, where, when, why, and how format that alerts the media to the Freedom Project. Include a description of your planning committee, its relationship to the Freedom Project, the time, location, participants, and a contact name and phone number. Distribute the advisory a week before the event.

## **MEDIA RELEASES**

The media release is your basic tool for generating coverage. It expands on your media advisory and fills in the details. Use it to supply background information about your program and explain your connection to the national celebration of the Freedom Project. Follow this form for your news release:

- Type double-spaced with wide margins (for editor's notes)
- Use your organizations' letterhead (8 \_ x 11)
- Include home and office numbers and available hours at the top of the page.
- Denote the date and release-time of the story, (i.e., 9:00 a.m. – May 4, 2003) or "For Immediate Release"
- Write a short headline that indicates the contents at a glance
- Use a dateline to begin the first paragraph (i.e., St. Paul, Minnesota)
- If there is more than one page, type "-more-" at the bottom. Use only one side of each page. Number each page, but try to keep the overall length to two pages.
- End your release with has marks "###" or "-end-"
- The lead paragraph has the famous five W's and an H—Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How?
- Structure the information in the body in order of importance, so the editor can cut where needed without losing the most important facts.

## **SOME FINAL THOUGHTS**

Your media champion should be outgoing and, above all, enthusiastic about the Freedom Project. When you complete your project, be sure to send us your results—it's essential! If you run into problems or questions and think we can help, e-mail us at [oneteam@championsofhope.org](mailto:oneteam@championsofhope.org).

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