

# WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

A great way to reach large numbers of people with messages about CTE issues and events is through a strong media campaign using newspapers, magazines, social media, radio and TV. Americans still view media, both local news organizations and national news outlets, as one of the most trusted sources for information. First and foremost, schools, districts and educators should establish a cooperative relationship with reporters who routinely cover education in their communities.

When a national education issue is reported in the media, offer yourself as an authoritative interview source (if appropriate). Building a presence with the media is a gradual process. Do not get discouraged if your first few attempts are turned down. Once a relationship is established with a reporter, keep them well informed with important updates. In addition, invite them to see firsthand various programs at your schools—not just special events such as back-to-school night or CTE Month, but with a personal invitation to observe an especially interesting lab or sit in on a faculty-business advisory group meeting.

## What is News?

Reporters and editors are concerned with informing the public of events and issues that affect their media outlets' target audiences. For something to have news value, it must, in the eyes of the news media, have impact on the general community. If it is important to the public,

it is important to the media. The essential elements of news value are timeliness, proximity, consequence (importance of event), human interest and conflict. Ask yourself these questions about your subject matter:

- ❶ What is the significance of your school's services or special events to the general public?
- ❷ Is the information timely?
- ❸ When education news breaks, is there an angle related to your school or to the profession in general? Are you an expert in that area?
- ❹ How does your expertise, special event or unique service help the community?
- ❺ Are trends in society reflected in your school?

There are several kinds of coverage:

**News**—usually noting conflict or change;

**Features**—usually stories of human interest or news that is not time sensitive;

**Editorials**—usually coverage by the media that takes a stand on an issue of relevance to the general public

or to a particular constituency; and  
**Op-Eds**—also opinion oriented, but generated by people not associated with the media.



## Where to Begin

Get started by reading the publications that

you would like to see cover your issues, by watching and listening to news broadcasts, and by becoming familiar with the reporters covering education issues. Develop a list of media targets and the appropriate writer or editor to contact for your story. If your stories are local, concentrate only on local media. If your story warrants regional or national coverage, develop a regional/national list.

## How to Develop a Media List

If you are concentrating your public relations program in a small local area, you should be able to develop a media list by calling or visiting the Web sites of the newspapers, blogs, and television and radio stations in the community and inquiring about who covers the education “beat.” If you are initiating a regional or national media campaign, you should consult a media directory, which can be found in ACTE’s Legislative Action Center at <https://www.acteonline.org/policy/##> or use the Internet to search for newspapers’ Web sites. Libraries and local organizations, such as the chamber of commerce or the convention bureau, may have developed a media directory as well. Twitter and social media is also a great place to look for media contacts, and there are several Web sites, such as [MuckRack.com](http://MuckRack.com), where you can search for journalists on social media by publication or beat.

Whether you use a national directory or a local one, you should check all contact names before sending information or making a call to pitch a story. Editors and reporters change beats frequently, and a news release sent to the wrong reporter usually ends up in the trash. Simply call the

media outlet and ask who is covering your issue area. Another option when calling is to describe your event and ask which person would be best to contact. For schools, the typical issue area is education, but your issue could apply to the metro or business sections. Remember that there are many more news outlets at your disposal than you might think. Do not overlook these important sources:

- Television stations have local news programs, editorial opinions and “talk back” opportunities, public affairs programs, one-on-one interview shows, and public affairs specials.
- Community cable stations can offer local news programming, community access channels and public affairs programming.
- Public television stations provide local news as well as a diverse mix of locally produced public affairs programming.
- Radio formats include all-news stations, radio talk shows, public affairs programming and editorial comment.
- Larger newspapers have numerous beat reporters covering specialized issues for the main news section, editorial page editors, and staff working on op-ed opinion pieces, letters to the editor, the business section, consumer reporters and “style” sections offering “soft” news.

## News Releases

A news release is a way for you to promote an event, issue or product. It needs to be compelling and include: who, what, when, and the details of why and how. The top of

the release should include your school's or organization's address and contact information, or the release should be sent out on letterhead. If mailing photos, be sure to attach each photo on a separate sheet, identifying students and explaining what is occurring in the photo. If sending releases by e-mail, let the press know you have photos of the event.

Before sending out releases, contact your local media and ask how they prefer to receive a news release and, according to their direction, either mail, e-mail or fax the news release. The majority of reporters indicate they prefer to receive releases and pitches via e-mail, but it's still a good idea to double-check the preferences of your local media outlets. Don't forget your own school newspaper and other special publications.

Due to the economic times, newsrooms are shrinking even further, so use discretion when sending out news releases.

Newsrooms are inundated with news releases, with the average editor receiving several hundred news releases in a typical week. Although no precise data has been collected, general opinion and observation indicate that only 10 to 20 percent of news releases submitted to the media are used in some way.

Releases must be written as skillfully as possible and directed to the appropriate person to help ensure they are read. If there is an important event or release, you may want to follow-up with a phone call after you send the release to ensure the release is read by the reporter or editor. It's best to send news releases and contact reporters early in the day. When contacting television producers, call the local station and ask

when the planning period is for a specific segment and try to time your communications to the producer according to that schedule.

## **Public Service Announcements (PSAs)**

PSAs are brief messages that provide helpful information to the public, solicit support for a particular cause, and/or offer an organization's free services. Unlike paid advertising, PSAs are carried free of charge by publications, radio and television stations in an effort to educate an audience and to encourage people to do something such as participate, call, write or contribute. However, most PSAs are now being distributed via online media such as YouTube or Vimeo video sharing services. Before attempting to place a PSA, determine whom you want to reach with your message. Then identify the publications and stations in your area that service that particular audience, or the appropriate social media outlets you want to share the video through. Once you have determined the outlets you want to target, contact the head of either the community relations or public service department to find out the proper procedures for submitting PSAs. You can find PSAs relating to CTE on the ACTE Web site.

## **Guidelines for Placing Op-Eds**

Many newspapers provide a forum opposite the editorial page, known as an "op-ed" page, for opinions that address issues of concern to your community. Pitch letters can be effective tools to propose an op-ed column to a publication. When your local education association or school is

involved with and has a point to make on a major, newsworthy issue, the op-ed page provides you with the chance to illustrate the value of the profession. Papers will also occasionally publish a philosophical piece that may comment on a continuing problem, such as funding for education or an observation on society.

If you are planning to submit your op-ed to a national publication, such as the Washington Post, send a pitch letter first to a handful of editors with the op-ed outline and then follow-up with a call. However, keep calls to the editor at a minimum and do not call at the end of the day when they are on deadline. In a pitch letter, you should indicate the subject matter and proposed author. Approach the editor first about your idea and then write the op-ed based on the editor's feedback.

Here are five general steps to follow when preparing an op-ed:

**1 Find opportunities.**

Review all publications in your region to determine which accept op-eds and formats that are acceptable. Are the op-eds generally about current social issues? Are the op-eds in a pro/con format?

**2 Decide on a topic.**

In general, try to relate your topic to a current issue. Ideas include the importance of CTE to remaining competitive, impact of funding on CTE programs, preparing students to be college- and career-ready and ways to build partnerships with the business community.

**3 Approach editors.**

If you are planning to send your op-ed to a national paper, send a pitch letter to appropriate editors outlining the proposed topic and author. If you have established a relationship with a particular editor, make a call instead of writing. If you are sending your op-ed to a local paper, go ahead and prepare a draft to send. The byline should be by a prominent person in your organization, community, or with a recognized expertise or specialty. It is acceptable for those with communications expertise to work with the individual in the byline to prepare the op-ed.

**4 Prepare a draft.**

Determine newspapers' guidelines for submitting an op-ed (e.g. format, length, double spaced, etc.). Op-eds usually run between 350-800 words, depending upon the paper. If you are preparing an op-ed for your local paper, be sure to localize with statistics and community examples. The byline should include the author's current professional position.

**5 Submit a draft.**

Adhere to deadlines. If you promise an editor you will have a draft by a certain date, do so. A cover letter or a short paragraph at the end of your op-ed should be used to tell the editor exactly who you are and why you are qualified to write this op-ed. Be sure to include your full name, title, address, e-mail and phone number so that you can be contacted. Remember, an interest in reviewing an op-ed does not necessarily mean the publication will

use the piece, even if it is particularly well written.

You may have to adapt the op-ed to the editor's wishes or to provide backup for points you make in the piece. If the editor ultimately declines the piece, try reworking it and begin the entire process again. Persistence is the key.

Keep in mind that some large newspapers may ask that an op-ed piece be on an exclusive basis, meaning no other publication can simultaneously print the piece. Smaller papers generally accept multiple submissions, as long as competing papers in the same city do not run the same piece. It's best to write different op-eds for each newspaper. Check each publication's particular policy. Also, remember that a letter to the editor is always another great way to promote the value of CTE programs.

### **Letters to the Editor**

Surveys show that the "Letters" section is among the most widely read sections of the newspaper. This section is an excellent vehicle for you to express your views on the value of CTE and to educate your local community and policymakers. Remember that policymakers read their local papers to keep abreast of what is occurring in their communities. Writing a letter to the editor provides a great opportunity to inform national policymakers of CTE's impact in the community.

Letters can also be used to correct inaccurate facts, promote your issue or praise/condemn a recent article. Write persuasively, reference research that supports your argument, and include local

statistics and personal stories to make your point. It is important to find the newspaper's policy for printing the letters. Most newspapers require that letters be between 200-500 words.

Encourage your colleagues to write a letter to the editor as well. If a media outlet receives several letters from people raising the same issue, they will be more inclined to print one or two of them. Even if your letter isn't published, by writing one you may help someone else with a similar opinion get published.

### **Working With Your Newspaper's Editorial Board**

You have read about what appears on the editorial pages of most daily newspapers, such as op-eds and letters to the editor. Here, you will learn who decides what goes on these pages and how you can influence them to consider writing about your issue.

Every daily newspaper has an editorial board that determines which opinions are expressed on its editorial pages. This board meets regularly to consider topics and opinions for editorials. As a member of the community, you may request a meeting. The editorial board consists of the editorial page editor(s) and editorial page writers. Some large papers may have several editors and numerous reporters in attendance, while smaller local papers may not even have an editorial board. If that is the case, you may request a meeting with the editor, who may bring along a reporter.

To schedule a meeting, call or e-mail the newspaper's editorial department expressing your interest and ask them for

the appropriate person to contact. Remember, timing is everything. Be sure to call at least a few weeks in advance to schedule a meeting as the editorial calendar tends to fill up quickly.

It's very important that you contact the editorial board with a timely event related to current news. Once you find the contact person, send a letter or e-mail explaining the purpose of the meeting and outlining your issue and how it impacts the community. Keep the letter concise and to the point. Don't overwhelm them with information. If they accept your request for a meeting, you will have an opportunity to present additional information during that time.

Once you have confirmed a meeting date and time, you need to be sure you are prepared. In planning for your meeting, you will need to decide who from your organization will attend. You may want to bring the president or leader of your organization, someone from within the community who is directly affected by the issue, someone knowledgeable about the legislation surrounding the issue, CTE students and a communications professional. Everyone in attendance should be an expert on the issue and prepared to answer any questions asked by the editorial board.

During the meeting, you need to present information on your issue and discuss why the media outlet should provide editorial coverage. Prepare a 15-minute presentation with one or two people speaking, and leave the rest of the time for questions and answers. Be sure to bring along a kit of information for each person on the editorial board. Include fact sheets, relevant research, charts and a list of experts.

After the meeting, be sure to follow up with the editorial board by sending a thank-you note.

## **Using Social Media to Promote CTE**

In the last few years, social media use has grown dramatically. Facebook has over 500 million members and Twitter has 190 million users sharing the latest news happening around the world. Media, Administration officials and Members of Congress are using social media to share the latest policy news. The Department of Education and the Obama Administration have capitalized on this technology and utilize it frequently to facilitate virtual town halls and solicit feedback from citizens.

Reporters, editors and publications are using social networks to connect with their users, share stories and gather story ideas from their readers.

A national survey of reporters and editors revealed that:

- 89 percent use blogs for story research
- 65 percent turn to social media sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn
- 52 percent utilize microblogging services such as Twitter

With recent surveys indicating over 90 percent of journalists have some presence on Twitter or a social media network, social media is a great opportunity to share stories and information with the media. Reporters and editors use social media to collect contacts for stories and gather ideas from readers and public relations representatives. Using Twitter to share stories and educate

the press is a fast, effective way to promote the value of CTE.

ACTE has Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn accounts to promote initiatives and information about ACTE and CTE at the national and local level. For more information about how you can use social media, please contact [ACTE's Media](#)

### [Relations Manager.](#)

Here are links for education agencies, media and Members of Congress on Twitter:

- <https://twitter.com/kryterion/education-reporters>
- <http://www.tweetcongress.org/>

# Times to Contact the Media

## CTE Month Events

- Contact the newspaper about four weeks ahead of time to alert editors and writers about February being CTE Month and activities planned during the month.
- Send information to television stations a week or two before an event. Follow up with the stations on the day of an event before 10 a.m.
- Follow up with newspapers a week before an event and again a couple of days before an event.

## Press Conferences/Teleconferences

- Hold press conferences between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. and on Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday because Monday and Friday are busy news days and you will receive less media coverage.
- Send information to the media ahead of time and follow-up on the day before or on the day of the event.
- Be sure to hold press conferences to 30 minutes or less and allow time for questions and answers.
- Create press packets with information, research and more in-depth information on the issue being discussed. Serve refreshments at the event to draw a larger crowd.
- Due to newspaper budget cuts, there is a smaller staff to cover news, so teleconferences are often a better option than “in-person” press conferences. Press prefer teleconferences because they can call in from their desks or on the road, and they don’t have to leave the office.
- Avoid having teleconferences/press conferences on major holidays or important dates (e.g. Valentine’s Day, religious holidays or after Thanksgiving).

## School Events

- Send information regarding school events to reporters and television stations as early as possible.
- Follow up with reporters the week before the event and provide them with the latest details.
- If press doesn’t come to an event, send follow-up information on the event. Due to their busy schedules, they may not be able to make every event. However, they often appreciate the information.

## Appropriations

- Send information about the importance of CTE to the reporter covering education and politics during state or national budget cycles. Include research information on CTE and how it impacts the local economy and workforce.
- Follow-up with reporters and continue to be a resource.
- Stories about CTE in your local paper during appropriations cycles will send a message to policymakers about CTE’s impact in your community. It may influence how they vote on key funding issues.