

MEDIA RELATIONS for Canadian Associations

**How to Be the Voice of Your
Members in the Media**

Huw Williams

Williams, Huw, 1966–

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ISBN: 978-1-927816-15-8

Printed in Canada.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Product Code: 1332

Published by:
Canadian Society of Association Executives
10 King Street East, Suite 1100
Toronto, Ontario, M5C 1C3
www.csae.com



CANADIAN SOCIETY OF ASSOCIATION EXECUTIVES
SOCIÉTÉ CANADIENNE DES DIRECTEURS D'ASSOCIATION

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Acknowledgements

This book would never have been written without the smart, energetic and dedicated association leaders with whom I have had the privilege to work throughout my professional career. Their commitment in helping their members communicate with the public, media, and government, has been inspiring. Their openness in allowing me to provide counsel along the way has been humbling and has taught me many valuable lessons that I have strived to incorporate in these pages.

These first-hand victories, and sometimes bloody noses, hopefully take this guide out of the realm of the academic and straight into the world of what works when associations are confronted by journalists and the challenges of the media environment.

In writing this book I have also tapped the expertise and knowledge of numerous media colleagues who work in large news agencies, television stations, and newspapers. Their willingness to share the insights and secrets of their profession has been invaluable. They have provided me an “MBA” in media relations through their over two decades of working with me both on and off Parliament Hill.

I want to thank my wife, Barbara Barrett, for her support and insight. As the Canadian media relations manager for a major worldwide automaker, she has taught me more about dealing with the media one-on-one than anyone I know. Her work with journalists in Canada and her media adventures hosting press trips in the deserts of Mongolia and the jungles of Belize are legendary and should make a book of their own. She, along with the entire team at Impact Public Affairs, contributed greatly to this project.

I also want to thank two key national leaders for teaching me about the media grind while I was in their service. Former Prime Minister Joe Clark, took a chance on me and gave me an opportunity to swim with the national media sharks during his time as Minister of Constitutional Affairs. In addition, former federal minister, Deputy Prime Minister and long-time Premier of Quebec, Jean Charest, taught me more about media instincts than I could have imagined. My role of dealing with the media during his historic run for Conservative Party leader was like a crash course in media relations and allowed me to cultivate media contacts that have lasted a lifetime.

Finally, I would like to thank the team at the Canadian Society of Association Executives for supporting and believing in this book. The volunteers and staff that make up CSAE leadership are always engaged in ensuring that members have the opportunity to learn and improve so they can help lead stronger, more vibrant organizations and ultimately build a better Canada. CSAE is very lucky to have a CEO such as Michael Anderson. He sets a level of professionalism that was an inspiration to me when crafting this book. A special thank you goes as well to CSAE's Stewart Laszlo, who set a new record for patience and persistence as this publication came together.

Preface

During my two decades in association media relations, I have never witnessed such extraordinary pressure on associations dealing with communications and media challenges as I have over the past five years. The world of news and information has gone from the 24-hour cycle introduced in the 1980s, to an almost instantaneous cycle, where news agencies file online immediately and journalists tweet news without traditional filters and delays.

Even more challenging is that association members have constant access to news and information on mobile devices and regular online pipelines that would have been unimaginable even 10 years ago. These same members expect their association leaders to be swift, agile and at the same time accurate, in order to meet the demands of the shortened media cycle.

Gone are the days when association members faxed an article from yesterday's newspaper to the head office and were content with a letter to the editor published the following week. Now, members can send an email containing a link to an online news story that has not yet been broadcast. Or, even faster, a journalist tweets 140 characters of breaking news with details to follow. Association members expect action and response before the story goes to air. Welcome to the media revolution.

The challenge is clear for association and not-for-profit senior staff: Be ready and able to manage the new media cycle or risk becoming irrelevant to members. Never have media relation skills and comprehensive media relations planning been so critical.

This publication will provide you with an understanding of the needs of today's journalists, and how to meet those needs with a clear focus on a workable plan that delivers well-framed messages.

Introduction

Dealing with the media is a risky and high-pressure business for association staff and board members. Answering a journalist's questions incorrectly or mishandling a media enquiry can be like a high wire act gone awry with immediate negative career implications. In my experience, association members have high expectations that the media will be handled professionally by their leaders. Too often, media missteps are a short path to an association member revolt. A disastrous interview can lead to a virtual lynching.

In Canada, most association professionals understand these risks and are cautious and even fearful of the media. However, not being present in the media or not responding to journalists' stories can be an equally risky approach. Members look for their association leaders to manage their media reputation. At the end of the day, associations are formed to be the voice of their members, and leaders need to step up to the plate or become roadkill.

To make matters more complicated, today's environment is supercharged, where knowing how to communicate on behalf of members is more crucial than ever. Associations are constantly judged by members on their presence and reach in the media. Media coverage is a fact of association management that is not going away and a key element that needs to be carefully managed at the most senior level. To meet member demand and to get ahead and stay ahead, association leaders must disseminate clear messages in a media marketplace of ideas that is hyper competitive. Capturing and holding the attention of the media is no small challenge.

Who Should Read this Book

This book is designed for senior staff who engage with the media on their association or not-for-profit's behalf. It is also designed for board members

who deal with the media as part of their leadership role, and to help all board members understand the best practices for dealing with the media. The book will also help association staff who aspire to more senior communications roles within the association world.

This book will serve as a reference guide to maximize the value of media relations activities and efforts based on the theory that a well-planned-out and proactive media relations effort will deliver positive long-term results for an association. I hope to inspire you to take action and realize that reaching the media effectively requires constantly reaching out and breaking through the clutter of competing demands.

Above all, this is a book of action, providing a road map for your association's media success. It will help staff and board members overcome their fear of the media and allow them to take their media relations game to the highest level possible.

Why the Media Matters for Associations

It is critical for associations to never underestimate the power of the media for shaping issues that affect members. In many ways, the media are the consistent connection point between all of your association's key stakeholders, members, the public, other associations, and policy-makers.

Your members and potential members will judge you based on your reputation in the media and the media results you produce. A strong, supportive story in a major news outlet can go a long way to boosting an association's credibility among members. Conversely, stinging criticism in the media or a mishandled media opportunity can be a challenge for associations to overcome within their own ranks.

Despite declining circulation numbers and no shortage of people predicting the decline of media empires, the fact is that the media maintains a strong grip on popular perception and influences public opinion. Recent research indicates that Canadians view traditional media as more credible than other sources of information.¹

In many cases, the media defines an issue before the public can consider it. As association leaders aim to influence the public agenda, there is often no substitute for starting to shape an issue with the media early.

1 Impact Public Affairs. 2015. *Omnibus poll on traditional media influence*.

Given the power of online search engines for policy issues, the importance of the media is magnified. Online media stories and coverage are often among the most highly placed links in online searches used by both the public and public officials.

At the political level, it is easy to visualize the simple example of a House of Commons, Health Committee legislative assistant preparing a Member of Parliament (MP) to meet with a particular association. The assistant's first Google search will almost always bring up the most recent national news stories on that health sector. These stories will have more independence and credibility to a legislative office than the association's own website could ever hope to have. To policy-makers, media coverage is a window on how the public views an issue. Often the media stories will define a policy meeting before the association representative steps into an MP's office.

Policy-makers who regulate associations closely track media coverage on key issues in a very sophisticated and consistent way. At the political level, elected decision makers receive daily electronic tracking and summaries of news coverage, including detailed breakdowns of audience reach and editorial angle. The media serve as a measurement for policy-makers about what the public concerns are regarding government policy. This means that as associations try to influence the public policy agenda, media coverage has inevitably shaped the political agenda in advance.

Interestingly, individual journalists' influence on public policy goes beyond just the stories or news segments they produce. Journalists are always in the halls of power, interacting with MPs and senators at the federal level or mayors and city councillors at the municipal level. On social media platforms such as Twitter, journalists and politicians are in constant contact about the issue of the day. The impact that journalists have on key issues can be enormous.

Perhaps the most important influence the media have is on association members themselves. An association can distribute member bulletins, letters to members, advertising and website updates. These actions can all shape member perception of association performance or management of an issue. However, from repeated experience, it is clear that one prominent newspaper article or television news segment can have more weight in shaping member opinion than all other efforts combined. A negative media story can be devastating to an association's cause or the association's leadership. This reality demonstrates that media relations matter to all associations.

The Role of Associations with the Media

For most Canadian associations, the role of engaging with the media is a natural part of the mandate of the senior staff. By definition, associations represent the collective efforts of their members and, as such, members expect their associations to be front and centre regarding media coverage for their sector. Beyond this, journalists and the public alike expect an association to be held accountable by its sector.

On more controversial issues, an association can act as a buffer for its individual members. As a member, it is valuable when your association answers tough questions that might tarnish your brand or reputation. For example, professional associations and societies are often called on to defend member practices or explain why the profession conducts itself in a certain ways. Trade associations play a similar role explaining industry-wide practices and activity. The media also calls when a sector's conduct seems to oppose public interest. No individual association member should take the heat for other members' conduct or for the sector as a whole—that is the role of the association.

On a more positive note, associations are also sought by journalists to lend their expertise when a news story breaks. These contacts can present great opportunities to champion the issues and members' concerns, or advocate your membership's value as a whole.

So why tell your sector's story in the media? The truth is that the media have more credibility than advertising or other forms of communication. According to the 2014 Edelman Trust Barometer, "Traditional media remains the most trusted (70 per cent) source for general news and information, followed by search engines (62 per cent), hybrid media (55 per cent), owned media (36 per cent), and social media (32 per cent)."² Increasingly, association CEOs in Canada are expected to be media savvy and, more importantly, media ready. Understanding the media and being skilled at dealing with the media is now part of the required skill set of most association leadership positions, including board members and senior staff.

2 Edelman Trust Barometer Canada. 2014. www.edelman.ca/2014-edelman-trust-barometer-canadian-findings/

Chapter 1

The Media Mix—Who They Are and How They Operate

Those who are inexperienced in dealing with the media often make the mistake of believing that all journalists are motivated by the same factors and behave the same way. This is not the case—it is important to adjust your approach because different types of media act and report quite differently.

This is an era of dynamic change for the Canadian media landscape. Five years ago, old and new media coexisted. The race to move to digital output has increased the pressure on media outlets to deliver cutting edge and more timely and relevant content. Old media are fighting for survival as digital platforms present enhanced competition and forces the public to scrutinize the value of traditional media sources. Today, the line between old and new is almost imperceptible as platforms converge.

Although there has been much hand-wringing and many major misconceptions that traditional media are dead, just the opposite is true. In fact, in the Canadian media landscape, traditional media have not lost their footing; they are just shifting to be more relevant on digital platforms. For example, most major Canadian news broadcasters are now as focused on how they deliver news to mobile devices as they were to traditional platforms. However, they are still focused on producing the news as the content or value proposition for Canadians.

For association leaders, a key starting point is understanding the different media segments, their scope and influence, and how they operate.

About the Author

Huw WILLIAMS, President of Impact Public Affairs, is a nationally recognized expert on media relations and strategic communications for not-for-profit associations and industry trade groups. He is a trusted advisor to scores of leading national and provincial associations, helping them achieve their public affairs objectives.

For over two decades, Williams has worked extensively with Canada's corporate, not-for-profit, and public sector leadership on award winning communications initiatives. He has also provided communications and media advice to former Prime Ministers, senior Cabinet Ministers, federal political party leaders, and some of Canada's leading CEOs. In addition to strategic advice, Williams also has extensive experience in the trenches as a corporate spokesperson, appearing on leading news and public affairs shows on all major Canadian networks.

Huw Williams is a recipient of CSAE's Griner Award for business excellence in the association sector. His other accolades include being named worldwide Public Affairs Professional of the Year finalist by PRNews Magazine, and having his name on the "Wall of Inspiration" located in Ottawa City Hall in recognition of his business, community, and philanthropic leadership in the nation's capital.