

How To Host a Press Conference

A **press conference**, a type of media event, presents a story to members of the media gathered in one place at the same time. Before inviting the press, make sure your event is, in fact, newsworthy. If your subject doesn't warrant a press conference, you can still pitch your story topic to the media by writing a letter or sending an email to garner interest.

Below are tips for hosting a successful and smooth press conference:

Choose the right location.

Your location should be easily accessible, have access to electricity, and offer parking. Unless you're sure of great weather, hold it indoors.

Consider “piggybacking” your conference on another event.

Your local media may be more inclined to provide coverage if the press conference is held in tandem with another event (e.g., school fair, walk-a-thon).

Consider looking for cosponsors who can help promote the event.

Local press may be more inclined to cover an event that is sponsored by several organizations and appears to have an even wider community reach.

Choose the right day.

For a weekday press conference, Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday is best. Reporters may forget about Monday events over the weekend, and they may be less inclined to put in a full day on Friday. If your conference is being held in tandem with another event, you may need to hold it on a weekend. Fewer reporters work on weekends—but there's less competition for news space.

Hold your event between 9:30 a.m. and 1:00 p.m.

Reporters will have a hard time getting there earlier—unless you're inviting them to breakfast. If it is later, reporters might miss their deadlines for filing stories.

Notify reporters in advance.

Send out your media advisory up to 3–4 days in advance. Sending the advisory too far ahead of time means you'll run the risk of having your event forgotten.

Remember, the media advisory is simply intended to get the press to “save the date” and whet their appetite, so don't “scoop” yourself. You want to get your conference covered, so don't provide so much information in your media advisory that anyone would be able to do a story in advance (and spoil your chances of coverage from everyone else). Politely tell eager reporters that they must wait for the event to get all of the details.

Follow up in advance of the event.

Use your media list to check the followup preferences of your contacts. If reporters on your list don't plan to attend, try to set up a one-on-one interview with your spokesperson so that you don't lose the opportunity for coverage.

Have your media kit ready for the conference.

The kit should include a press release about your story, copies of any speaker statements, brief bios of all speakers that include their full names and correct titles, and factsheets or backgrounders that describe your program. Distribute kits to reporters when they sign in and send reporters who do not attend the press conference a kit by mail or special delivery.

Prepare your spokesperson.

Prepare for the news event thoroughly. Anticipate tough questions and practice short, *quotable* answers. (*Note: The Communication & Social Marketing Center provides technical assistance in spokesperson training. Contact your communication specialist for help.*)

Think visually.

A good visual at your press conference will greatly enhance the likelihood of television covering your event. Television generally prefers visuals that are horizontal, in color, and graphically simple. Of course, if your press conference is held alongside a school-sponsored event, children may provide the perfect visual. Don't forget to include your photo op alert with your media advisory. (*Please see the Media Advisory Template for more on the photo op alert.*)

Take pictures or video.

If you can, hire a photographer or videographer. If you can't afford it, have someone in your organization take pictures or video. Though large daily newspapers probably won't want to use your photos, smaller weeklies might. The pictures could be useful for your own internal communication purposes, and digital images or video can be posted on your Web site. (*Note: Be sure to follow your district's policy for using photographs that include children, families, or district employees. If your district does not have a policy in place or offer release forms, use the Media Release Form template in this section.*)

Prepare the room.

Don't pick a room that is too big (your event will look like a flop even if people show up) or too small (you'll have disgruntled reporters standing outside). Refreshments (even water) are always appreciated. Equip the room with the technical equipment you need: a podium with a microphone, a "mult box" that allows several reporters to easily record the event by plugging into the podium microphone, risers in the back of the room for TV cameras, and a table in the front for radio reporters to set up. Attach a sign bearing your logo/program name to the podium so that it appears in all camera shots. Test your equipment—*twice*.

Set up a sign-in table outside of the door.

Have a staff member register reporters and hand out media kits. Record the name, outlet, email address, and phone number for each reporter who attends so that you know who actually attended. Your staffer should be directed to answer *logistical questions only*—never, ever should anyone other than designated spokespersons go on the record with a reporter.

Work the room.

Assign a personable staff member with the task of “working the room.” His or her only job during this press conference will be to shake hands with the media, thank them for coming, and attend to their needs as they arise. Remember, this is NOT your spokesperson; he or she should NOT offer any details of your issue to the press!

Start promptly.

Begin the conference no more than 5 minutes after the designated time. Introduce yourself, welcome all those in the room, thank them for attending, and begin the statements.

Let a limited number of people speak.

Designate only a few spokespeople—these will be the only people who can make statements and answer questions. Keep speeches brief and to the point. Remind your spokespeople to look up from the podium and make occasional eye contact with reporters.

Get personal.

Consider including statements of an “ordinary person” who has been affected by the issue at hand. A string of expert statements is often upstaged by a moving personal story. Be sure that you know what all of your guests plan to say and work with them on their messages, if necessary.

Answer questions.

After all of the statements have been made, open up the conference to questions. Ask reporters to identify themselves and their outlets. Ask all speakers to answer questions at the podium, where the microphones are located. Expect additional questions, “one-on-one,” after the press conference, especially from radio and TV station reporters, who may ask questions to get you to reiterate key points or your best quotes.

Close the press conference.

Try to limit the conference to no more than 1 hour, including questions and answers. Thank all those who came and offer to answer any additional questions or provide more information, if needed.

Follow up again.

When the conference is over, mail, deliver, or email media kits to any key reporters who planned to attend but didn't. Follow up with any reporters who asked for information that you couldn't provide.

Say thank you.

Whether you ultimately like the coverage you get or not, send an immediate note of thanks to everyone who attended your press conference.

Get clips of stories.

Monitor the media for stories based on your press conference. Keep copies of stories that appear in newspapers or magazines. Add great coverage to your media kit!

For assistance in planning a press conference at your grant site, contact your communication specialist. Our toll-free number is 800-790-2647.