

Brought to Nonprofit and Government Members
By the Points of Light Foundation

*Developing Media Messages
for Volunteer Programs*



**POINTS
OF LIGHT
FOUNDATION**
&
VOLUNTEER CENTER
NATIONAL NETWORK

Points of Light Foundation
1400 I St. NW, Suite 800
Washington, DC 20005
info@PointsofLight.org
202-729-8000

Thank you to the following contributors and editors:

*Tamar Abrams, Bonnie Brady, LaVerne Campbell, Tricia Dwyer-Morgan, Bonnie Nance Frazier,
Roxanne Hanson Andersen, Noelle Mathis, Marcia Stein*

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SUMMARY

Welcome to *Working Solutions*, a bimonthly collection of tip sheets and articles designed to provide Points of Light Foundation nonprofit and government member volunteer managers with practical solutions to everyday challenges. The first bimonthly edition of *Working Solutions* focuses on developing media messages for your volunteer program.

While your agency may have a communications department that coordinates publicity for the entire organization, you can help establish targeted media messages for your volunteer program and its projects. Often, volunteer program managers find themselves coordinating media messages on large volunteer projects and events. This *Working Solutions* will help you focus those efforts.

To succeed in working with the media and getting publicity for your program's activities or issues, you must know how to use meaningful words, and how to develop messages that touch people. Creating media messages allows volunteer program staff the opportunity to brainstorm about the image and information they want to present to the public about their program and its projects. By crafting thoughtful messages, designating volunteer program spokespeople, and creating resource directories, any volunteer program can present a more focused, accurate, and consistent image to the media.

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DEVELOPING MESSAGES THAT RESONATE

Appearing on the evening news, in your community's daily newspaper, or on a talk radio program can help you cultivate new volunteers, publicize a fundraiser, or get people talking about important issues—at no cost! Organizations or individuals that master the art of working with the media reap the benefits daily.

Attention given to a large project may be an opportunity to frame the work of volunteers around a certain issue that could shape community opinion and attract volunteers and resources to your program. Opportunities to work effectively with the media should not be squandered. The time to prepare is now-- before an event occurs. A volunteer program that plans has a better chance of capitalizing on positive media given to a large group event in a way that will enhance community receptiveness to its volunteer program or, on the other hand, of minimizing the damage to its reputation and bottom line in the event of a crisis.

To succeed in working with the media and getting publicity for your volunteer program's activities or issues, you must know how to use meaningful words and how to develop messages that touch people. The success of your program depends on the messages you use to convey who you are and what you do. To develop these messages, first identify your target audiences:

- Are they current or potential volunteers?
- Potential corporate partners?
- Policymakers?
- Board members?

You may not need entirely new messages for each audience, but your messages will work much better if you tweak them for specific people. For example, if you talk to teenage girls, you probably won't use the same language you would use to address potential funders. It's important to distinguish messages from other types of language you might develop or use.

Mission Statement.

This is a statement of one to several paragraphs that describes a program's goals, values, and ideals. Mission statements are often used in fundraising appeals and in annual reports, so they can be written in stiff, formal language.

Slogan or Theme.

These are catchy phrases such as the Peace Corps' "The Toughest Job You'll Ever Love," or the Army's "Be All That You Can Be." They don't describe a volunteer program, so they needn't be complete sentences. They are memorable, short, and snappy.

Program Description.

This is a 20-word description of what your volunteer program does and how it benefits the community. It should grab an audience and be easy to understand, free from jargon or acronyms.

Messages.

These are the heart of your communications efforts. Messages convey to your audience why you do what you do, why it matters and is important to them, and what they should feel, think, or do about your work. Messages are meaty, easily understood, and persuasive.

WHO SHOULD BUILD YOUR MEDIA MESSAGES?

Have you ever cringed because the head of your agency could not describe the role of volunteers in your agency's work? Do you worry any time a reporter approaches a volunteer at a large volunteer event for their comments? Developing a collaborative media message plan can help you ensure that staff at all levels of your organization, board members, and volunteers feel comfortable sharing your messages with the public. If you have an agency communications department, they can help you build a plan specifically targeted to the needs of your volunteer program, that are built on overall agency messages. Using this *Working Solutions*, you may develop a simple one-page document or a sophisticated manual.

With so many people involved in creating and using your media messages, staff and volunteers can become confused about lines of communication with the public. The following steps can help insure that the media and public are receiving your messages from the most accurate and trained source possible.

- Name one or two articulate and experienced spokespersons that know the volunteer program and understand the situation, event, or issue.
- Establish an information flow system. Make sure all staff, volunteers and board members understand their roles and how they will be alerted and informed throughout a crisis or large event.
- Create lines of authority and key roles that clearly establish who is in charge and the channel for official and accurate information. For many items this will be a member of your communications department, but for items that relate specifically to your volunteer program you may find that you or one of your volunteers is the more appropriate spokesperson.

Staff and Volunteers can brainstorm about:

If your audience is the media:

- When does the media most often call the volunteer program?
- When are you most likely to call the media?

If your audience is the general public:

- What types of information are most important for members of the public to know about the agency and its mission?
- What information, especially in a time of crisis, is most important for members of the public to have access to?
- What information do you need the public to know about your programs to make your jobs easier and their ability to join-in easier?

If your audience is a funder or potential funder:

- What information will they need to help them choose your volunteer program over someone else's?
- What information will help them know your volunteer program matches their mission?
- Is there a "statement of purpose" line that is asked for on most of your grant/funding applications?

If your audience is a potential collaborating partner:

- What do they need to know about you?
- How will they know what you do?

Who are your other audiences?

WHAT IS INCLUDED IN A MEDIA MESSAGE

1) Key Messages.

What are the 1-3 main points you want to emphasize each time you talk with the media. It helps your volunteer program to give a consistent message each time the media calls.

THREE KEY MESSAGES: (Sample)

- A) **Family volunteering activities are prime opportunities for community members to spend time with their families and to model important values.** Research shows that for one-third of American households, family volunteering is a part of family life.
- B) **Volunteering is a key way for people to learn new skills, meet new people, forge community bonds, and contribute to the health of their community.** Volunteering is a symptom of strong social capital in a community.
- C) **Actively working to engage people with disabilities in volunteer efforts increases the pool of volunteers and volunteer resources, and makes the community effort more representative.**

The **bolded statements** in each section are **program mantras**. They will be recited repeatedly to reporters, legislators, public policy groups, etc. The remaining portions of each section are simply supportive statements that are yours to modify, delete, or expound upon as it suits your personal style.

Keep in your topic catalogue additional information resources around each *Key Message*. See attached sample.

2) Topic Catalogue

A catalogue contains card files of topics most commonly requested. Each card contains a short version of *Key Messages*, space for: Key Messages about this topic in particular; a list of resources at the volunteer program or known of by the program

(Sample Topic Card)

Family volunteering activities are prime opportunities for community members to spend time with their families and to model important values. Research shows that for one-third of American households, family volunteering is a part of family life.

Extra information:

- 36% of Americans say family volunteering is a part of their family life. From the 1994 FAMILY MATTERS & Gallup Survey
- The most common family type in volunteering is the nuclear family (60%--Gallup Survey)
- Family types can include nuclear family units, single-family homes, grandparent headed homes, etc.

Resources for more information:

- *Family Friendly Volunteering*, by Points of Light Foundation: marketplace@pointsoflight.org to order
- Independent Sector web site for more statistics on Family Volunteering

3) Media Directory

Directory of media contacts including physical address, e-mail addresses, fax numbers, contact names, deadlines and information on the most appropriate form in which to send a media release should be updated periodically. Already published directories include: State Media Association Directories and Local Media Directories. See "Where to Get More Information" and <http://www.texaspress.com/StatePressLinks.html>, and check out the "Media" section in your local yellow pages.

4) Volunteer Program brochure

A simple brochure or hand-out that gives basic background information on your program's history, goals, and objectives should be developed and kept current. Also include volunteer program contact information.

5) Agency Resource Directory

A directory listing topics your agency can answer questions about and the name and phone numbers of the appropriate staff people with which to talk. This can also be included in media kits.

6) Miscellaneous

What other information does your volunteer program need to have available at a moment's notice to give to members of the media, your communications department, other agencies, or representatives of city, state, or local governments?

Points of Light Foundation (Sample) Resource Directory

***** LATE BREAKING NEWS? NEED SOMEONE TO TALK TO ABOUT ISSUES RELATING TO VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT, VOLUNTEERING, COLLABORATION? CALL THE POINTS OF LIGHT FOUNDATION! 202-729-8000.**

Points of Light Foundation
And Volunteer Center National Network
1400 I Street, NW Suite 800
Washington, DC 2005
202-729-8000
www.PointsofLight.org
1-800-VOLUNTEERS
www.1800VOLUNTEER.org

Additional Copies or Alternative Formats Publications?

Ask for: Product Development; 202-729-8000
or info@PointsofLight.org.

Engaging Communities of Faith?

Ask for: Interfaith Project; 202-729-8000
info@PointsofLight.org

Engaging people with disabilities?

Ask for: Volunteer Center Development;
202-729-8000
or info@PointsofLight.org

Engaging young people?

Ask for: Youth Outreach; 202-729-8000
or info@PointsofLight.org

Media Involvement?

Ask for: Communications; 202-729-8000
or info@PointsofLight.org

Membership ?

Ask for: Membership; 202-729-8000
or membership@PointsofLight.org

WHY DEVELOP MEDIA MESSAGES?

- 1. More than 95 percent of US homes have at least one television set, and one-third of all US households own personal computers.** A lot of information is being exchanged. As a volunteer manager, you spend much of your day working on some of the hot issues of our time: poverty, hunger, homelessness, education, violence, and health care. Most Americans are interested in these issues, and want to receive information from people who are directly involved in the issues. You can become a trusted source of information if you identify your target audience, use messages that resonate, use credible, articulate spokespersons, and become proficient at working with the media.
- 2. Developing a media message plan allows staff and volunteers the opportunity to create the image they want to present to the public.** In the rush of planning a major volunteer event or dealing with a crisis, staff and volunteers rarely have time to craft a coherent message as a group. Your media messages should be something that all of your stakeholders, including volunteers, feel comfortable using. Take the time to include volunteers and appropriate staff in planning media messages to increase their willingness to use them in the future.
- 3. Many agencies cannot afford to hire a professional spokesperson for the volunteer program.** The executive director, communications staff and board members are often representing the volunteer program in overall messages about the agency. Volunteer managers need to be assured that a consistent message is going out about their program and its activities. In addition, skilled volunteers can become your most articulate spokespersons, when provided with clear messages to use.
- 4. Established messages can keep mixed information or misinformation from being presented to the public.** By thinking ahead about *Key Messages*, staff and volunteer anxiety about interactions with the media can be greatly reduced. There is no need to worry about being at a loss for words, because they've already been thought out in advance. You can present a more focused, accurate, and consistent program image to the media. Your planned media messages can ensure that you are always providing information to meet your volunteer program's objectives.
- 5. Initiating timely contact with the media is easier with a media message plan.** Members of the media often need information on tight deadlines. When staff have access to pre-approved language and formats for media messages, they can more efficiently write press releases and letters to the editor.
- 6. What are other advantages to having a Media Message Plan for your program? Write your response here:**

HOW TO CREATE YOUR MESSAGES!

- **Keep them short.** Each message should be no longer than two sentences of 10 to 15 words each. People can't absorb huge chunks of information at one time. Don't give them more than they can digest. More importantly, when you speak in brief, concise sentences or sound bites your message has a better chance of getting into the story or reaching the public unedited.
- **Never give your audience more than three major messages at a time.** Use the same three messages over and over. They should work together. Repeating the same messages several times before an audience emphasizes your points' importance.
- **The very best messages have impact, are irrefutable and strong, and touch people.** Effective messages are visceral, not just intellectual. You want your messages to speak to people's own personal experiences. When you convey too many facts or statistics, people may stop listening.
- **Language is critical to good messages.** Many people develop potentially great messages but blunt their power with empty words or jargon. For example, "agency" and "services" don't have much emotional impact on anyone. Consider the impact of your words on your audience. Do people hear the word "services" and clamor to receive some?

When crafting your messages, ask yourself the following:

1. Who is my audience? What are some of their characteristics (education level, natural inclination to be on my side, political affiliation, age, etc.)? What do I need to say?
2. What does my audience need to hear? What are they ready to hear? Am I assuming too much knowledge on their part? Am I using words, acronyms, or concepts that are unfamiliar to them?
3. Do I need to be reassuring, instill alarm, show compassion, and/or demonstrate strong leadership?
4. What do I want them to think, feel, or do as a result of my messages?
5. Do I need a metaphor or example to explain my message to this particular audience?
6. Am I using old messages that don't fit this particular audience? Would it be better to start over and make sure those messages are really appropriate for this audience?
7. How will this particular audience feel upon hearing this message? Is that how I want them to feel?
8. Do these messages match the characteristics of my audience? And remember repeat, repeat, repeat your three messages!

Message Review

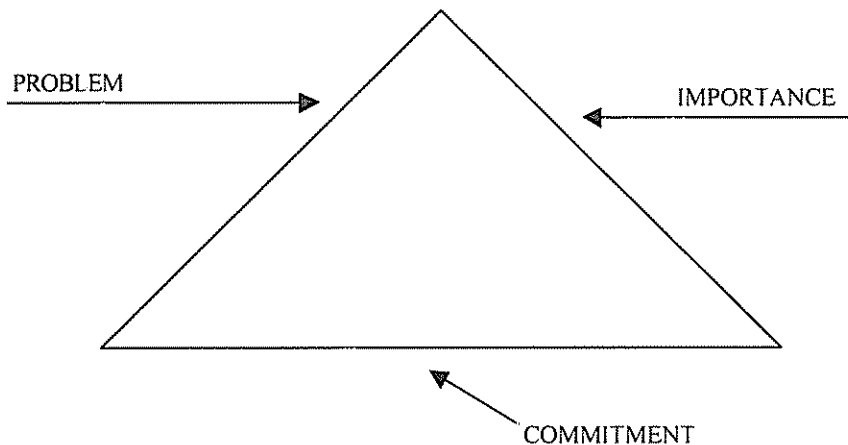
When an event is over, it is time to review your media messages. Did you get out the information you wanted? Was the tone of the message in the media in line with the message you tried to convey? Be honest and reflective. What didn't work? Where could you adapt the plan? Review media coverage; connect with key volunteers, constituents and representatives to garner feedback. Use this valuable information to make needed corrections and adjustments. This may require changing your *Key Messages*, the spokesperson selection process, adding a new information vehicle, or incorporating a safety measure, etc.

USING THE MESSAGE TRIANGLE

Use the triangle method of message development to design your messages. Each leg of the triangle can stand on its own, but the messages work better in concert. Begin your messages with any leg of the triangle.

- **PROBLEM:** One leg of the triangle should contain a message that conveys what the problem or issue is. For example, "Because we live in a large rural area, many people in the County feel disconnected from the community."
- **IMPORTANCE:** Another leg should contain a message that conveys why the problem or solution is important to the audience. For example, "Volunteering brings people together and plays a key role in creating healthier families and communities."
- **COMMITMENT:** The third leg should ask them to make a specific commitment to the issue, or to commit a specific action for the project. For example, "Come to a Volunteer Fair at Generic Middle School on Thursday night to find out how volunteering can change your life."

The Message Worksheet can be copied and used by spokespersons each time they prepare to speak publicly. They will appear more confident and animated if they keep three main messages in mind and learn about the audience in advance.



MESSAGE WORKSHEET

Topic:

Target audience:

Characteristics of target audience:

Action, emotion, or thought I want my messages to trigger:

Message #1:

Message #2:

Message #3:

LANGUAGE WORKSHEET

Words I currently use to describe my organization or the work we do:

Test each word:

- Does it convey an emotion?
- Does it have impact?
- Does it make sense to the general public?
- Is it persuasive? Does it contain enough information to give a general idea of what your organization does?
- Does it make people want to hear more?
- Describe your organization or agency in 20 words or less.
- Make sure the description is easily understood and compelling:

After you finalize your volunteer program messages with input from staff, volunteers, and board members:

- Test it with outsiders.
- Run it past volunteers, board members, family members, other volunteer programs, and friends.
- See if it resonates with them, and if it accurately reflects the work you do.
- Once you have words that work, start using them!

WHEN MEDIA MESSAGES CAN BE USED

When is the appropriate time to use your media message? Any time! Here are a few specific times when using your media messages may lead to amazing results.

When you are working on:

- Volunteer orientations/trainings
- Media releases/advisories
- Public Presentations
- Advocacy work (legislative visits, etc.)
- Public policy forums
- Brochures/marketing materials
- Media briefs
- Annual reports
- Letters to the editor
- Web sites
- Newsletters
- One-on-one interviews
- Editorial board meetings
- Community bulletin boards

WHERE TO GET MORE INFORMATION

It's impossible to present a complete guide to messaging in just a few pages, but we hope you found the basic information presented here useful. In a subsequent edition of Working Solutions, we will offer more tips and ideas on working with the media. In the meantime, you'll find some interesting resources listed below:

1. **Volunteer Marketplace Catalog of the Points of Light Foundation at 1-800-272-8306 or marketplace@PointsofLight.org for publications on many topics including marketing and media.**
2. Radtke, Janel. *Strategic Communications for Nonprofit Organizations*. Wiley & Sons, 1998.
3. Salzman, Jason. *Making the News: A Guide for Nonprofits & Activists*. Westview Press, 1998.
4. Miller, Peter G. *Media Marketing: How to Get Your Name & Story in Print & on the Air*. Harper & Row, 1987.
5. Bonk, Kathy et al. *The JoseyBass Guide to Strategic Communications for Nonprofits*. JoseyBass Publishers, 1999.
6. Leadership Directories, Inc. *News Media Yellow Book: Who's Who Among Reporters, Writers, Editors and Producers in the Leading National News Media*, 21262-74140.
7. Bacon's Information, Inc. *Bacon's Media Directories*, 31292-22400.
8. Points of Light Foundation, *A Volunteer Center's Guide to Working with News Media*, 202-729-8000 ask for Volunteer Center Development.