Council on Foundations | CF Leadership Coalition

A Guide to Place-Based Media Relations

Background

Earned media is one of the most durable ways for community foundations to build public trust, elevate the work of grantee partners, and shape how the issues in their grantmaking portfolios are understood. It is also one of the harder capacities to build and sustain, particularly in regions where newsrooms have contracted and a single reporter may cover the county budget, a school closure, and your foundation in the same week.

Community foundations hold a real advantage in that environment. As place-based institutions, you carry community knowledge that local reporters need and rarely have time to gather. That makes media relations less a matter of securing placement and more a matter of becoming a trusted, recurring part of how your community is explained to itself.

The practices below are written for community foundation communications staff at any scale — from the sole communications manager to the director leading a team. They are organized around the lifecycle of a media relationship: building it, pitching into it, responding within it, and sustaining it over time. They may be adopted directly or adapted to your shop's size and the media landscape in your region.

Before Outreach

Build the relationship
Effective media relations begins well before there is anything to pitch:

- Map every outlet that covers your geography: the daily paper, public radio, television, ethnic and community press, nonprofit newsrooms, and local newsletters. Record the reporter, the beat, the publishing rhythm, and the last several stories they produced.
- Read a reporter's articles before making contact, and reference it specifically. Sharing general praise signals that you are not familiar with their work. Research prior to outreach gives you a sense of the reporter's understanding of community foundations and creates opportunities to educate them on the landscape.
- Offer an introduction with no ask attached. Fifteen minutes is enough to explain what the foundation funds, what you are observing across the region, and who else is worth talking to.
- Position the foundation as a connector. Access to grantee partners, community members, and regional context is frequently more valuable to a reporter than a press release.

- Help on background when you cannot help on the record. Assisting with a story the foundation is not quoted in still builds standing.

Pitch with the editor in mind
A reporter must sell a story internally before writing it. A pitch that anticipates that conversation is considerably more likely to advance:

- **Local specificity.** A neighborhood, a school, a figure tied to this place rather than a national trend.
- **A person at the center.** Someone who has already agreed to be interviewed.
- **The reason it matters now.** A pending decision, a deadline, an anniversary, or a trend the outlet is already tracking.
- **Verifiable numbers.** Figures the reporter can confirm, with a source you are prepared to provide.
- **Access.** A site visit, an interview, documents, or something to photograph.
- **A first look, when appropriate.** Offered with a real deadline attached.

Before sending, apply a simple test: could an editor draft the headline from your first two sentences?

During the Engagement

Respond without being opportunistic
- Respond to every inquiry, including those you decline. Ask for the deadline and deliver ahead of it.
- When an answer is not yet available, share what is known, name a time you will follow up, and meet it.
- Avoid a pattern in which the first contact in a year is a request for coverage.

Communicate impact without centering the foundation
- Lead with the community and the partners doing the work. The foundation's role is a sentence within the story, not the story itself.
- Offer the grantee as the interview. Prepare them thoroughly, then allow them to speak for themselves. If a grantee is unavailable, offer a spokesperson at your foundation that has intimate knowledge of your initiative.
- Describe the work plainly when a figure cannot be sourced. Inflated or unverifiable numbers are among the fastest ways to lose a reporter's confidence.
- Share credit publicly and privately. Reporters notice who claims it.

After the Interview

Sustain the relationship

- Maintain one touchpoint per quarter with each priority reporter, with no ask attached.
- Correct factual errors precisely, in writing, directly to the reporter, once. Distinguish an error of fact, which is worth raising, from a framing you dislike, which generally is not. Begin with the reporter rather than the editor.
- Keep a log of every interaction: who, when, what was discussed, and what was promised.
- Follow reporters when they change outlets. The relationship belongs to the person, not the masthead.

How the Leadership Coalition Can Help

You don't have to build this alone. As part of your coalition membership, we can support your media relations work by:

- **Beat mapping.** Send us your region and we'll help you build or refine your outlet-and-reporter map.
- **Pitch and message language.** We'll draft or sharpen pitch emails, media advisories, and messaging on request.
- **A second read.** Share a draft op-ed, statement, or response and we'll give you feedback before it goes out.