

## Chapter 3: Get Media Coverage

### Introduction

Media work is a critical component of any progressive grassroots campaign. The media--be it TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, or other publications--is where most people get their information about issues of the day. Genetic engineering is an issue that still is not being seized by many media outlets, and it is, therefore, an issue that few people in this country know much about.

We, as organizers, have the ability to change that, to bring this issue to our community and to the people of this country, and to show them the hazards of GMO's and what we can do to resist them while promoting local, sustainable agriculture. Developing a plan to tell your campaign story to the media is a key piece in making your work effective and in building towards long-term change on the genetic engineering issue.

GEAN is available to help you get your message out to the general public through the media. Local organizers in the GE-free movement can shape public opinion through well-planned media work. Because sending press releases to so many reporters may be beyond the capacity of many grassroots groups, GEAN offers a media service (through our membership with Green Media Toolshed) that allows us to send your press releases to key reporters in your area and, if appropriate, throughout the country. The service is free to our affiliates; just call us at 563-432-6735 or email [info@geaction.org](mailto:info@geaction.org) to talk about the options. GEAN is also available to help edit letters to the editor, press releases, and to connect you with media strategy advisors who can help you develop your media work.

Although it can be challenging to get progressive messages covered by the mainstream media, some careful planning can produce amazing results. A well-planned media effort can do an incredible amount to further your campaign and change consciousness about this issue. Poorly-planned media work, on the other hand, can zap the energy of your members and end up conveying the wrong message about the issue. Take the time to build media work into your campaign plans, to really think about what messages you want to convey, who you want to convey them to, and the most effective avenues you can use to get your message across.

This chapter has some of GEAN's favorite resources on doing media work, but there are many, many other guides out there, many theories on how to develop media plans, organize press events, conduct effective interviews, etc. Additional resources can be found at [www.greenmediatoolshed.org](http://www.greenmediatoolshed.org).

## **Develop a Message**

A campaign communication strategy is all about building a machine that is intended to shoot messages to the right audiences, at the right time, and in the right way. To borrow a violent metaphor: if the communications strategy is the gun, the message is the bullet. In other words, it's all about message!

Message is the core ideas of a campaign expressed in a way that reaches people. Message articulates the change(s) you want in the world and how people can get involved to make them happen. The message encapsulates the campaign story. An effective format for doing this is Problem + Solution + Action. Message comes from organization and motivates organization among your target audiences to affect the campaign target.

A winning message takes into account what will work with the audience to build support. The message is not restating the campaign goals and it is never in the imperative. Effective messages make the case in a way that is compelling to the target audience. Ideally, different messages should be tested with the audience to see which one works best. There should be one and only one campaign message and it needs to be repeated innumerable times (in innumerable ways), but tailored for the different audiences.

### **Messaging to Motivate**

Messages are intended to mobilize people. To do so, messaging must start with where your target audience is and move them from there. What do we actually want our target audience to do? Change the way they vote, consume, argue, or make decisions? While our campaign message should stay the same for all of our target audiences, we will usually expect different actions and reactions from them. For instance, we may want our message to move a politician to change policy, a company to stop the release of a particular GMO, a journalist to communicate our message, and the person on the street to stop buying genetically engineered foods.

Campaigning is not education. Campaigning is a motivational exercise. It narrows the focus of attention in order to get people to take action. In this respect, campaign messaging has much more in common with advertising than it does with a college lecture. Campaigning lowers the barriers against action and increases the incentives to take action until the rabbit pops down the hole, the dog jumps through the hoop, the President signs the decree, the company moves out of your state, etc.

Education, in contrast, is a broadening exercise. It uses examples to reveal layers of complexity, leading to lower certainty but higher understanding. Campaigning maximizes the motivation of the audience, not their knowledge. Try using education to campaign, and you will end up circling and exploring your issue but not changing it. Of course, all campaigns have some educational effect, but it is education in order to organize, not vice versa. Campaigns educate by doing, through experience, not through passively providing information. Information is not power until it leads to mobilization.

### **Message Discipline**

A campaign should be very disciplined about how many core messages it has. One is ideal, three is manageable, and five is the absolute limit. The process of creating your message should lead to the best articulations of the issue. Therefore, you should use that message and that message only. This is message discipline. Key messages are repeated over and over and over again. They may be tailored slightly different for different audiences (particularly the action

component) but ultimately the repetition builds upon itself until your message is so saturated that it has become conventional wisdom.

### **The Golden Rule of Messaging = KISS**

Keep It Simple, (Stupid). Simplicity should not be seen as a vice or a cop-out in messaging. Simple means boiling down complex issues into their true essence without distortion. Messages are not policy statements or scientific discourse. Rather they are focused ideas that can move and replicate in idea space.

### **Developing Your Message: Rules of Thumb**

*Rule 1:* Have one main message with up to three underlying themes to support it.

*Rule 2:* All messages should support the organization's main goals.

*Rule 3:* Messages are not necessarily sound bites; they are the ideas you are trying to communicate to the public. (Messages are reinforced by sound bites, phrases, statistics, and anecdotes.)

*Rule 4:* Messages don't change frequently. For messages to have impact, they have to be repeated over and over again.

*Rule 5:* Messages can be tailored for specific audiences, while still remaining constant.

*Rule 6:* Consistent messages should permeate all of your communications efforts, not just contact with the media.

*Rule 7:* Messages must be simple. They are ideas that can be explained in a sentence or two - if it requires a paragraph or two, keep working.

*Rule 8:* Remember: messages take time to create. Don't rush the process.

### **Exercise: Develop Campaign Messages with the Message Box**

Use the Message Box to design and structure a message into core and supporting messages. The exercise utilizes four different functions or types of messages: Threshold Messages, Action Messages, Solution Messages, and Reinforcement Messages. Ultimately your campaign message must be able to address all these areas, but depending on your target audience, one of these four may be the lead, and others may be supporting messages.

For example, if your audience generally already agrees that coal is a problem for health, then you could fill in the threshold message, the solution message, and the action

message. People know that coal is a problem so you have them there. Your threshold message could then assume that coal is bad and say that Bush is helping coal companies when clean energy could provide all of the energy that we need. You can help stop this by voting this November for Initiative A. These are the three messages and you could have sub-points under each (Bush supporting coal companies, clean energy works, how you can make a difference).

## Draw a message box



Put your group's name or the campaign's name in the middle box. Now you have four spaces to write your key messages. You may choose to use only three of the spaces.

The message box is designed this way because messages don't need to be delivered in a vertical order. In other words, if you wrote messages in the following way:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

...your spokespeople may think they always have to start with message number one. This is not true. For some audiences, you may find that message number one is the place to start; for others, message three is best. To complete a message box, use the long lines to write in the main points. Don't worry about exact wording at this point. Make bullet points next to the messages and fill in anecdotes, statistics, phrases, and sound bites that reinforce this message.

### *Questions that may help you develop your message box*

*Space #1*, top of the box: What do people need to know, believe and care about to become engaged with your organization or your issue?

*Space #2*, moving clockwise: What obstacles or misconceptions do you need to overcome to get people engaged?

*Space #3*, What needs to happen or what do people need to do to meet your organization's goals or have impact on your issue?

*Space #4*, If people did this, how would things be different?

To help lead your group through message development, copy the Message Development Box handouts that follow to distribute while working together on message development.

*From Green Media Toolshed,*

<http://www.greenmediatoolshed.org/training/TargetAudienceandMessageI.adp>

*Strategizing A Media Campaign: Crafting an Effective Message* Developed by the SmartMeme Media Training Project [www.smartmeme.com](http://www.smartmeme.com)

## **Deliver your Message**

### **Tell your Story**

The best way to communicate effectively with the public on environmental issues is to develop a simple and compelling story that is repeated over and over again in the media. To be compelling, a story must have certain core elements: a problem or threat, a victim, a bad guy who is responsible and should be held accountable, a good guy and a successful, or potentially successful, solution (you have pointed to the problem, now what is your recommended solution?).

The following paragraphs use a real-life example from the environmental movement. Here, a coalition of groups was able to take a very complex issue - international trade - to the people of the United States. Using a current event - an issue involving endangered sea turtles - that was much easier for the average US citizen to identify with, a successful effort was launched not only to help these endangered creatures, but to help push for reform of the international trade system.

### **Start with the facts**

#### ***Do not assume that everyone understands***

Most Americans are not comfortable with basic science or are unfamiliar with technical issues. When describing the 1998 international trade dispute over something called "Turtle Excluder Device" use, the following was used to explain this somewhat confusing issue: The US law in question requires that all shrimp sold in the United States be caught in nets with a Turtle Excluder Device, an "escape hatch" which lets shrimp pass into the net while guiding turtles out.

#### ***Keep it simple and specific***

"The final ruling is widely expected to uphold the earlier WTO ruling, which called the US turtle protection law an unfair restraint of trade. Environmental groups strongly protested the ruling, asserting that it had no legal, scientific, or economic justification."

#### ***Build on what Americans know and believe***

Americans recognize the importance of protecting endangered species: "Sea turtles are the real losers in this ruling," said Tim Eichenberg of the Center for Marine Conservation. "Hundreds of thousands may unnecessarily die in shrimp nets due to the politics of a trade dispute that ignored the very real danger of their extinction and dismissed an effective, inexpensive solution." You can also link your issue to a similar issue that has caused a great political and grassroots 'stir': "Given that the President lost a major battle on trade when 'fast track' authority was not reauthorized by Congress, the implications of eroding American support for trade for future free trade agreements - like the renegotiation of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade that will begin soon are important."

#### ***Be accurate and cite sources***

Use credible third-part verifiers (doctors, scientists, etc.) to document your points. Cite scientific studies. Revealing that we have coalitions and alliances with other kinds of groups - in the case of international trade, with labor or human rights organizations, for example - can expand believability and audience.

#### ***Avoid jargon, technical mumbo-jumbo and lots of numbers***

Make the facts accessible by putting them on a human scale. Don't lead with: "Properly installed TED's exclude about 97 percent of the sea turtles from shrimp trawl nets while losing

only about 1-3 percent of the shrimp. The use of TED's is recognized by countless scientists and the National Academy of Sciences as the single most important action necessary for sea turtle recovery." A fact such as: "It is estimated that 155,000 sea turtles drown in shrimp nets every year," creates more sympathy with the media and average Americans.

### ***Be consistent and repetitive***

Decide on the set and wording of facts that make your best case and then make it a mantra that's included in all of your public written and verbal communications: "There is no legal, scientific or economic justification for this ruling." (Over and over)

## **Make a Personal Connection**

### ***Define what is at stake***

Lay out the consequences. People are more likely to care and act if they already have an emotional and vested stake in the issue, such as their concern for an endangered species, food safety, or their rights to choose. "Environmental leaders see the latest shrimp-turtle trade ruling as the latest in a string of arbitrary and environmentally destructive WTO decisions that threaten both environment and public support for international free trade."

### ***Make it local***

Reference local places, people, history, and hopes for the future. The closer we bring it geographically, the more likely we are to get a response. Stories on the local news are much more likely to be seen and remembered by your neighbors than anything on the national news. In the shrimp-turtle case, a series of references to how US shrimpers have been using TED's for years, prompted several local stories. For example, check out this excerpt from the New Orleans Times-Picayune: "In an unusual alliance, both environmentalists and shrimpers want the federal government to appeal the panel's decision. Both groups said they will lobby Congress and the Clinton administration. 'I don't want this body telling us which (laws) they like and which ones they don't,' said Tim Eichenberg, an attorney for the Washington-based Center for Marine Conservation. Eichenberg said the WTO ruling could undermine domestic environmental laws because Congress will be under pressure from American shrimpers who think foreign competitors have an unfair advantage. The unfair advantage, the American shrimpers say, is that their foreign counterparts no longer have to abide by the US rules, while they do. 'The shrimp (industry) is getting battered real bad,' said Jeffery Scott, owner of a Dulac (Louisiana) processing plant."

### ***Define the enemy***

Characterize it as a fight between good guys and bad guys. Tell them who is wearing the black hat, who is dumping what in the local river or in the air. It helps to fight a known foe: "This World Trade Organization decision exposes the failure of current international trade rules to adequately balance trade and environmental priorities. The WTO ignored its own charter with twisted legal reasoning that would never stand up in US court of law. The WTO is broken and needs to be fixed."

### ***Show and tell***

Use visuals to help tell the story. This makes for better TV. In the fight to protect endangered sea turtles, the environmental groups used B-roll and large pictures for television news.

## **Provide solutions and specific actions to take**

### ***Couple problems with solutions***

Advocacy efforts work best when problems and solutions are linked together, when we explain the problem and tell the audience how they can help solve it. Be specific about the actions people can take.

### ***Provide an action "menu"***

People believe they can help in a variety of ways- as consumers, as community members, and as voters. An action menu that lists actions individuals can take increases the likelihood they will act on behalf of the environment. Keep in mind the distinction between public education activities and lobbying when developing your action menu. Asking people to be informed shoppers, such as buying unbleached paper products or dolphin-safe tuna, is a public education, charitable purpose activity. Asking people to contact members of Congress or the state legislature is lobbying. This is an important distinction to make because of potential legal restrictions that may apply to your organization.

## **Manage your message**

Once you have carefully developed your message, 'message development' helps ensure that everything your organization and its staff does or says reflects that message. This can be something as essential as the fact that an organization that promotes 'livable spaces' (alternative transportation and less urban sprawl) offers incentives to its staff to take public transportation, walk to work, or other activities. However, it also means that events, interviews, written materials, etc. should all somehow convey and reinforce the group's message.

Proper message management means that you will never be led 'off message' - when you do or say something that does not support the themes that your message set up. This often happens in the media when an issue that is similar to yours is more popular. To the extent that this gets you in the door with the media, it can be useful, but be careful not to be led completely off-topic.

For example, an organization that works on the issue of curbing urban sprawl would like to keep transportation tax money from being used to fix existing roads, yet the interviewer wants to talk about how potholes cause damage to cars and the rising costs of repairs due to...Well, you get the idea. It may be best to simply say, "I can't speak about how to fix cars, but I do know our study shows fixing the potholes instead of building new roads can save drivers a lot of money in car repairs." Don't let anyone lead you away from your message.

*From Green Media Toolshed,*

*<http://www.greenmediatoolshed.org/training/TargetAudienceMessage/DevelopYourMessage.adp>*

## **Plan a Press Event**

This section provides a primer for planning a smooth press event. There will always be last-minute problems with set-up or speakers, but proper planning can really help avoid headaches.

### **Set your expectations**

The first thing you should do when thinking of organizing a press event is to set and manage expectations. What is your measure of a successful event? The number of reporters? Number of stories? Story content? Policy changes? You need to determine if an event with a few key reporters could do the job just as well as a larger event.

It is also important to remember that few events draw a large number of reporters, and even fewer stories will be written. Reporters receive an endless stream of event invitations, and even when they are interested enough in your issue to make it a priority, their editors may not share those priorities.

### **Notify the Media**

Every press event must provide written notification to reporters in the form of a press advisory. These advisories should be followed up with phone calls and additional background information when requested. Advisories should be sent five to seven days before the planned briefing, conference, or other event. Follow-up calls should begin three to four days before the event, and continue until the day of the event.

It is also critical to make sure that every event you plan is included in the 'daybooks.' These private or public relations news wires are an additional source for getting the word to the media about your news conference. Most large cities have an Associated Press (AP) and United Press International (UPI) daybook, which is run by editors in each market. Check out AP Online.

Most markets have a daily and a weekly version of the daybooks. Deadlines for daybooks are usually 3 p.m. on the day before your event for daily calendars. Call and get the deadlines for weekly daybooks. Mail, phone, or fax the information at least 48 hours before your event to your local daybook. Be sure to call and double-check that the editors included your entry - this is not a favor, it is a calendar of events for the media to attend/respond to.

Most editors simply take the opening sentence of your advisory along with the contact name and phone number for your entry in the daybook, so make sure that the most important and compelling information is at the top.

### **Reporter RSVP List**

Keep track of who will be attending your event. Maintain an RSVP list for the event, listing the reporter's name, attendance status, their outlet, and the date.

### **Tracking Press Calls**

Tracking progress on press calls can be as simple as the following:

### **Calls for (Event name and date)**

Name, Washington Times, (phone)

4/8 faxed info

4/13 has info, will call if he needs anything

Name, Reuters Atlanta, (phone)

4/7 left voice mail

4/8 faxed info, out of town on assignment, back in office 4/10

4/13 interested in interviewing speaker, can call back if no word by 4/20

Name, Gazette (IA), (phone)

4/9 took name, number, will get back to me, might assign

4/14 faxed material

Or, you can use this sample form for calls:

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Outlet: \_\_\_\_\_

Reporter Name and Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone/Fax: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact Notes:

Notes:

Follow-Up?

### **Keeping Track**

It is important to keep track of who has spoken to whom, what was said, and which reporters have expressed interest. It may be very helpful to keep a computer document that indicates which reporters plan to attend an event. If it is on the computer, then it can be updated by anyone who makes press calls, without overlap.

### **How They Run**

#### **Format**

It is important to stage the press conference in a convenient location or at a site that relates to the press conference itself. For example, a press conference about problems with the state government's actions on wildlife protection may be best suited for the steps of the state capitol. If possible, going to an interesting site - such as a wildlife area to announce a lawsuit to protect the land - may be very helpful for television or radio reporters. On the other hand, if an indoor, or more central location is needed, the state courthouse is a great place to announce a lawsuit as well. Finally, several large cities have press clubs where a large number of reporters are centralized. This is great in places such as Washington, DC where it is in your best interest to make it as easy as possible for reporters to attend.

#### **Set-up (indoor)**

A podium (and table, if needed) should be placed in front of a solid color, preferably blue

curtains. Make sure there are NO distracting paintings, murals, or mirrors. Make arrangements for a press registration table that has a sign-in sheet and where reporters can pick up press kits, or other information. The press registration table should be set up 30-40 minutes prior to the press event, and should ALWAYS be attended by a representative from your organization.

### **Visuals**

Try to have visuals available during the press event. A blow-up of your logo as a visual for the podium is always a good idea. Make sure you place it directly under the microphone, not below the logo of the hotel or place of the event. If you have charts or other visuals in a report, a blow-up can be made at a local photo or copy shop for less than \$25. If you have a video clip or an issue ad campaign, make copies to distribute to the broadcast media. Remember, an assignment editor is more likely to make the decision to cover your event if there is a visual story to tell. Do not be afraid to use gimmicks and props. Television stations love them. Remember, "talking heads" make boring television footage.

### **Timing**

Generally, since press events are focused on breaking news, they should begin either at 9 am or 10 am. If you schedule an event earlier than 9 am or later than 11 am, you risk losing several outlets due to deadlines, conflicting news stories, or simply because reporter do not like to attend early morning events. (They tend to work late). Try to limit the speakers to a total of 20 minutes (maximum), allowing reporters enough time to ask questions about what interests them most. Once the event runs over an hour or so, reporters will start to leave in large numbers, but expect them to leave at any time during the event.

### **Speakers**

Limit the number of speakers to a maximum of four to allow for follow-up questions from the press. Attempt to designate no more than three main spokespeople to take follow-up questions. If you have a large coalition, invite representatives to bring written statements (for the table or press kits) and help respond to questions, but not to serve as presenters. Likewise, you can invite policy experts to answer specific questions during the reporters' question-and-answer period.

The opening statements should be crisp and not time consuming - about three minutes each. The combined opening remarks and statements should only take 10-15 minutes. A moderator should introduce the speakers and be prepared to coordinate the question period. This person could also be delivering an opening statement. Make sure your press kit includes a list of the names and titles of your speakers so that photographers can take a copy and correctly identify each person.

Think carefully about the order in which your press conference speakers will appear. Have a complete text of their statements, but ask them to summarize the most important points and try not to read each word. Reporters not attending the news conference will need copies to use to write a story if they are unable to personally cover your media event. Also, preparation and circulation of the text at the news conference eliminates errors copying down remarks or misquotes. You might want to make an audio copy of the event and pass the tape along to reporters who plan to file a story and need more details. But don't send them a tape unless they ask for it. Few of them have time to listen.

### **Press Kits**

Be sure to prepare a press kit with essential materials for distribution to reporters covering the press conference and for use by those who cannot attend. Be sure to include copies of any report or study being released, prepared statements, speaker biographies, background information, contact information, and other relevant information.

## **Follow-up**

Develop a sign-in sheet for reporters who attend your press conference. Check the list immediately and identify key reporters and media outlets that did not attend. If possible, courier or hand deliver the press kit to key outlets not attending the press conference (unless they have already told you they are not interested) and follow up an hour or so later with a call to key reporters or editors. Often, this type of follow-up can increase coverage of news events or stimulate additional stories.

After your event is over, have someone ready to send out copies of your media release that summarizes the most compelling aspects of the event. Have the fax numbers/emails of all the reporters on your list ready in advance, so the person lined up to send out the release is ready to go as soon as the event is done.

## **Evaluation**

It is important to review what worked at each press event and what did not. Schedule an evaluation with key staff or volunteers as soon as possible to review the organization of the event, the way in which press conference participants reacted to press questions, and the coverage or lack of it. The evaluation session should also look at ways in which press contacts can be made more effectively for the next news event.

## **Event Planning Checklists and Forms**

The following checklists and forms should be used for each of your press events. Adapt these for your particular situation and special needs.

### **Logistics**

EVENT:

DATE:

STAFFER IN CHARGE/ POINT PERSON:

<u>TO DO</u>	<u>BY WHOM</u>	<u>BY WHAT DATE</u>
Media advisory		
Speakers		
Speaker Preparation		
Materials		
Event room		
Event special needs		
Press list		
Media calls		
Sign in sheet		
Staffing of Event		
Taping of event done by		
Typed sign in sheet		
Copies of Tape		
Sending out media release		
Follow-up calls to reporters		
Tracking of Media Clips		

*From Green Media Toolshed, [www.greenmediatoolshed.org](http://www.greenmediatoolshed.org)*

## **Choose and Prepare Spokespeople**

Choosing and preparing the best spokespeople for media work is as critical as proper message development. Environmental organizations typically want to pick one official spokesperson for all issues - usually the executive director or president. However, it may be more beneficial to identify and prepare an array of spokespeople on a variety of subjects that your organization cares about. Below are some suggestions for choosing and preparing spokespeople.

### **Go Beyond the Usual Suspects**

Consider looking outside the "usual suspects." Consider research scientists, legal experts, economists, academics, consumer advocates (for magazines or television particularly), doctors, elected officials, and agency representatives who can lend your organization outsider credibility. Working with great representatives from other types of advocate organizations, such as the PTA or religious organizations, also helps you present a compelling, well-rounded story to the media.

If your organization or your speakers are considered to be "extremists," then you may want to consider reaching out to representatives or groups who are seen to occupy a more "middle" ground. For example, an environmental group with a very strong stance on endocrine disruptors may want to consider including a representative from a government agency, consumer's group, or other organizations that the press and public consider more moderate.

### **Speaker Control**

When recruiting potential speakers outside of your organization, you must be sure their message serves your purpose. It can be catastrophic for your organization if, in the middle of a press briefing, your speakers are not properly articulating your message or worse, espousing the opposite point of view. Be sure to properly prepare and "vett" speakers before an event or interview. Check their credentials with other experts in the environmental, scientific or legal communities.

To vett a speaker - or check their credibility - call them to discuss the topic in which you are interested. Tell them your organization is considering a press event (or other work) on the subject. Explain that you are looking for as much information as possible and want to speak with a variety of experts. Have they published anything themselves on the issue? What are their viewpoints? Have they ever dealt with the press? Don't promise anything until you have checked them out thoroughly.

Finally, make sure that speakers are well versed in what has previously been said to reporters on the issue at hand. Outline the points that need to be made, establish who will touch on which key points, and discuss the time allotted to each.

### **Consider a Debate**

If you feel that it will lend credibility to your story and you have extremely strong speakers, organize a debate or at least offer the "other side" the opportunity to speak at your briefing or interview. You may also need to make this call if reporters indicate that getting both sides of the story is critical to making the news; at least in this situation, you can offer three speakers from your side and offer one slot to the other side. This can lend a great deal of credibility to your event in the eyes of the media.

When deciding to invite the competition, be sure that your messages and speakers are unbeatable and that it will make a significant difference in the amount and quality of press coverage.

For example, the highly charged controversy over energy policies following the Kyoto Climate talks presented the environmental community with a wonderful opportunity to host a debate. A formal press conference-style debate featuring two excellent speakers from the environmental community and two less impressive representatives from industry resulted in a rousing "win" for the environmental community and some great press coverage.

## **10 Tips for Spokespeople**

Whether you have one spokesperson or several, it is important for your spokespersons to be in-tune with your message and well versed on contact with the media. If at times you use an outside spokesperson, you should select someone who is able to connect to your target audience and influence people that feed information to your target audience.

### **1. Know Your Message**

You must know what your message is and be sure to get it across. A reporter or interviewer may not ask you a question that directly addresses your issue. If you know your message, you should be able to take any question and answer it in a way that stresses the main points you would like to get across.

### **2. Use the ABC's to Stay on Message**

Remember that interviews with reporters are not regular conversations; they are an opportunity to get your message across to the public. No matter what the reporter asks, reply with one of your core messages. Try the ABC's of talking with a reporter: Acknowledge the reporter's question, Bridge to your message, and deliver your Core message. "That's a very interesting question, however what we must remember is..." Even when it feels awkward, keep bridging back to your message; chances are if you say it enough, that is what the reporter will print.

### **3. Make it Interesting**

You should know supporting facts, anecdotal stories, counter-arguments, and critical details. You should be able to carry a conversation on your issue that is worthwhile to your audience and interviewer.

### **4. Keep Yourself Together**

Do not drown your message in arguments and shouting. Stay on message, attack your opposition as needed but always remain calm, rely on facts and stories to make your points, and focus on results of moving your message to your target audience.

### **5. Punt, Don't Bluff**

Don't know an answer? Promise to get back with the specifics. Do not give false information.

### **6. The Facts**

Work with the facts. You do not have to respond to hypothetical information or questions and uncertain facts that lack sources or documentation.

### **7. Clear and Concise**

When you answer questions or discuss issues, use terms that are easily understood by your audience.

### **8. Stay On Track**

If your message becomes sidetracked, bring the discussion back to the point. Maintain composure and pause to recollect your thoughts to be sure you make your point.

### **9 & 10. Give Thanks and be Grateful!**

Thank the audience, thank the reporter, and thank the interviewer. Show gratitude for the time you were afforded to discuss your issue.

## Press Releases & Media Advisories

A **media advisory** is a one-page sheet that alerts reporters to an upcoming news event. It is sent out several days before the event and is followed up with a phone call. A **press release** announces breaking news and is written like a news story. (Sample advisories and releases follow in this section.)

### Media Advisory Quick Tips

- **Keep it short.** List the event and its participants, the date, and location. Be sure to include the name and phone number of a contact person for the press. Briefly spell out the purpose of the event. Are you releasing new research findings? Protesting government actions? Let broadcasters know if you will have video or a live feed.
- **Offer a compelling preview.** Write a strong headline and lead sentence that peak reporters' interest. Do not reveal the news you will be releasing, but do provide a tantalizing glimpse that gives them reason to attend.
- **Send it to journalists.** Fax or e-mail your advisory to reporters who cover your issue, to editors, news directors, bureau chiefs, and TV/radio producers. Also, send it to the daily calendars (daybooks) of wire services.
- **Follow up with a phone call.** Give the essential details of your event—make sure your pitch is tight and persuasive. Leave a message if the journalist is not there.

### Press Release Quick Tips

- **Put the most important information first.** Your headline should grab reporters' attention, and your lead sentence should summarize what is most newsworthy. Next come supporting facts and quotes from spokespeople or experts to illustrate and liven your data. At the end of the release, include a one-paragraph mission statement from the sponsoring organization. Be sure to put the name and phone number of a contact person at the top of the release.
- **Include all the facts necessary for reporters to file a story.** Write in a fluent, newsy style that conveys authority and fully covers the issue so that reporters will rely on your release as they write their stories.
- **Send it to journalists who got the media advisory.** In addition, put together a press kit to hand out at the event. The press kit should contain the press release, along with other relevant materials, such as fact sheets, news clips, statements from supporting groups—whatever helps the press understand your issue and write their story.
- **If reporters need substantial time to prepare a story, send an embargoed release ahead of the release date.** Make it clear that the story **cannot** be published before the date specified on the release. But also be aware of the risk. A reporter might break the embargo and publish the news ahead of schedule, ruining your press conference, and media strategy.

- **A few technical tips.** Send out the press release on letterhead stationery of the sponsoring group. Keep it to one page or, at the most, two pages. State *-more-* at the bottom of each page, except for the last page where you put a ### sign.

*(Sample news advisory)*

**News Advisory**  
September 3, 2004

**Contact:** Melanie Bondera, Hawaii GEAN  
(808)640-1643  
Noli Hoye, GMO-Free Kauai  
(808)651-9603

**New Research Reveals Widespread GMO Contamination and Threats to Local Agriculture from the University of Hawaii's GMO Papaya**

*Farmers, Health Professionals, Scientists, and Concerned Citizens Return Contaminated Papayas and Demand University Take Responsibility for Clean Up*

**WHEN:** Thursday September 9, 2004; 11am

**WHERE:** Plaza, University of Hawaii, Hilo

**WHAT:** News conference and direct action

**WHO:** Farmers, health experts, University of Hawaii scientists, concerned students, and citizens

A coalition of farmers, health experts, scientists and concerned citizens will release the results of pilot testing for GMO contamination from the genetically engineered papaya. The coalition's research, which has been gathered over the past year and a half, has now been verified by independent laboratory tests. In addition to releasing their research, farmers and backyard growers will return their genetically contaminated papayas to the creator of the GMO papaya: the University of Hawaii. This action will be the launch of a grassroots campaign calling on UH to help protect local agriculture by taking responsibility for cleaning up GMO papaya contamination.

*\*\*Great visuals and non-violent direct action! \*\**

###

From *GMO-Free Hawaii*, [www.gmofreehawaii.org](http://www.gmofreehawaii.org)

*(Sample press release)*

**News Release**  
September 9, 2004

**Contact:** Melanie Bondera, Hawaii GEAN  
(808)640-1643  
Noli Hoye, GMO-Free Kauai  
(808)651-9603

**New Research Reveals Widespread GMO Contamination and Threats to Local Agriculture from the University of Hawaii's GMO Papaya**

*Outraged Farmers, Consumers and Backyard Papaya Growers Return Contaminated Papayas to the University of Hawaii in Crop Dump*

**Hilo, Hawaii** -- Independent laboratory testing results released today reveal widespread contamination from the world's first commercially planted genetically engineered tree, the papaya, on Oahu, the Big Island, and Kauai. Contamination was also found in the stock of non-genetically engineered seeds being sold commercially by the University of Hawaii.

Farmers, health professionals, concerned citizens, and University of Hawaii scientists joined GMO-Free Hawaii in announcing the shocking results of their research at the University of Hawaii, which created and released the GMO papaya. Dozens of outraged farmers, consumers and backyard growers brought their contaminated papayas back to the university to underscore their demand that UH provide a plan for cleaning up papaya contamination. The coalition also called for liability protection for local growers and the prevention of GMO contamination of other Hawaiian commodity crops.

All samples were tested by Genetic ID, one of the world's leading scientific laboratories for genetic testing. Composite samples from the Big Island and Oahu both revealed GMO contamination. Nearly 20,000 papaya seeds from across the Big Island, 80% of which came from organic farms and the rest from backyard gardens or wild trees, showed a contamination level of 50%. Oahu's composite of papayas, primarily from organic farms, showed contamination of over 5%, and trace levels of contamination were found on an organic farm on Kauai. One package of seed of the Solo Waimanalo papaya, a non-genetically engineered variety purchased directly from the University of Hawaii, also tested positive for GMO contamination.

"It is an outrage that UH is selling contaminated papaya seeds to our local farmers and growers," said Toi Lahti, an organic farmer and papaya grower from the Big Island. "Not only could organic farmers lose their certification by growing genetically engineered papayas, GMO papaya seeds are also patented by Monsanto among others. This opens farmers to oppressive lawsuits based on claims of patent infringement, where corporations such as Monsanto have not hesitated to sue even those who unknowingly planted such seeds."

"These tests indicate that UH's non-GMO seed stock is contaminated, and so there can be no doubt that the University must take immediate action to protect farmers, consumers and the environment," said Mark Query of GMO-Free Hawaii. "Papaya contamination is a case study in the threat that GMO contamination presents to local agriculture. It is now clear that coexistence of traditional and GMO crops is impossible."

Farmers raised concerns about the impact the contamination crisis could have on export markets, particularly to countries like Japan that have stringent regulations about importing genetically engineered crops. "The Big Island is home to most of the commercial GMO papaya fields in the state," said Melanie Bondera, a farmer from Kona and member of the Hawaii Genetic Engineering Action Network. "The continued planting of GMO crops risk giving Hawaiian agriculture an undeservedly bad reputation in major export markets around the world."

Dr. Lorrin Pang, MD, MPH, a public health specialist, discussed potential human health threats posed by the GMO papaya and other GMO foods, including increased antibiotic resistance and unexpected allergenic reactions. “All of these concerns are troubling in themselves, but they would be less worrisome if the GMO mutations did not spread beyond our intentions. Today's report shows that they do,” Dr. Pang said. “If a health problem arises that is attributable to GMO foods, it will be impossible to recall such a live, dangerous mutation once it has been released into the environment.”

Dr. Hector Valenzuela, a scientist specializing in tropical crops from UH Manoa’s Department of Tropical Plant and Soil Sciences, asserted that the University’s focus on promoting genetic engineering is steering Hawaiian agriculture in the wrong direction. “Instead of supporting untested technologies like genetic engineering, the University of Hawaii should redirect their resources to focus on researching and promoting workable, non-GMO solutions to local agricultural problems. Hawaii farmers need agricultural advances that can protect their farms and our state’s agricultural economy over the long run.”

Bondera outlined the campaign being launched by GMO-Free Hawaii based on these contamination results. “The University and the biotechnology industry have touted the GMO papaya as an unmitigated success for local papaya growers; the true story of Hawaiian farmers’ experience with the GMO papaya, however, is a far bleaker story. Despite the problems local growers have had with the GMO papaya, the University is now genetically engineering taro, pineapple, banana, sugarcane, and other commodity crops,” said Bondera. “The problems with GMO papaya contamination show us that there are too many unanswered questions about agricultural biotech to be releasing new experimental genetically engineered organisms into our environment. We do not support the further release of other genetically engineered commodity crops, and call for a commitment from the University to fund research into local, sustainable agriculture.”

*Photos available.*

####

*From GMO-Free Hawaii, [www.gmofreehawaii.org](http://www.gmofreehawaii.org)*

## **Background Materials for Reporters**

The main goal of a media campaign is to facilitate accurate and balanced reporting of the news you are trying to release, whether it is the results of a scientific study or your organization's legislative agenda. Your job in this campaign is to make the media's job as easy and as interesting as possible. One way to do this is to provide reporters with a sufficient amount of background material.

The problem with most press packets is that they concentrate on providing information rather than conveying messages. All of your documentation (statistics, quotes, and so forth) should be arranged in a clear, concise way that supports the key themes you want to highlight. Information must be credible, concise, and well-documented. Remember, your several-page packet will likely be boiled down to several paragraphs in a story, so help a reporter write the story by focusing on the key elements.

If you give reporters too much information, you give them a choice of what to cover and risk overwhelming them to the point where they will not read any of it. You should make the choice - then sell that choice by supporting it with focused, well-written materials.

Outlined below are several types of background materials that can be included in a press kit to help reporters find the most interesting and important information the resources they need. The faster reporters can find the information they need, the better your chance at successful media placement. If your information is accurate and easy to use, then reporters are more likely to write stories that accurately depict your position/issue/report.

### **Layout**

You want to make sure that the most important or compelling piece of information (the release, for example) is in the spot where the reporter will look first upon opening the packet: the right-hand side. Supporting articles should always be placed toward the back of the packet, behind other background materials. Make sure that contact or biographical information is near the front. Also, make sure that your card is included in the packet. If you mail or courier the packet, include a note reminding the reporter of the request for information and offering to help set up interviews, etc.

### **Press Kit Materials may include:**

#### *Media Advisory*

If you do not plan to write the Press Release after the event, you may want to include the advisory in your press kit. This serves as a reminder to the reporter who may hold on to the kit for future use.

#### *Press Release*

You may choose to write a press release before the event takes place. This should be written as something that an objective reporter could use in its entirety as a news story. Few will, of course, but looking through that lens helps you pare the story down to its essentials. You are responsible for anything you say in the release. Some outlets will use the release verbatim so confirm all facts, figures, quotes, and spellings. Small, weekly papers are most likely to run a release verbatim.

### *Supporting or Background Materials*

Complex issues often require more substantiation than can be included in a press release. It is often useful to provide the media with additional briefing materials, fact sheets, statistics, or report summaries. Use headlines that reflect your main themes and organize all data under those heads. Charts and graphs are often useful ways to summarize information; state key findings in declarative, bold-faced sentences.

Avoid overload. Focus on being concise and credible. Always indicate the source. You will increase your chances of coverage if you highlight local or state information or the impact of national data on a specific community, state, or region. When sending to more than one state, you may want to tailor individual press kits to those areas.

### *Press Statement*

A statement from the press conference speakers or from noted individuals if the event is less structured - a noted scientist, or economist, for example. These should be very brief and focused on the key messages. Speakers may deliver expanded remarks at the actual event, but do not force the reporter to sift through the introductions, warm-up, etc. to find the salient quote.

### *Speaker Biographies*

You should include a paragraph-long bio for each speaker, including their name, affiliation, and all contact information. This will help reporters when citing quotes, or setting up interviews. Do not force reporters to call you in order to contact the source unless your experts require prepping or want to screen each interviewer.

### *Background Statement*

A background statement on your organization or coalition should be no more than one page long and include:

- Name of organization
- Contact info for organization and speakers
- Main purpose of organization
- Recent work that your group has accomplished: a list of issues, for example.

### *Visuals*

If you have digital photos that you would like to make available to reporters, please send them to GEAN and we can set up a special on-line folder for your event that reporters can access for copies of the photos. Let reporters know that you have photos available, and provide them with detailed information on how to access the photos.

## Pitching to Reporters

If you want reporters to come cover press events, or if you want them to cover breaking news, or if you want to begin developing a relationship with a reporter, you are going to need to get them on the phone and “pitch” your story to them. It can be intimidating to think about calling a reporter. However, there are lots of ways to prepare and be sure that your pitches go as smoothly as possible.

One good thing to practice is getting mentally prepared to make these calls; remember that these reporters’ jobs are to find good stories to cover. By creating a strong press event or releasing an important new piece of information and letting them know about it, you are making their job a little easier.

Although the following tips are geared towards soliciting immediate coverage, much of this advice applies to building on-going relations with reporters over the phone. Whether you are calling for an event or calling to follow up on materials you sent to a reporter, you will want to consider the following:

- **To the point:** If you do not know the reporter, you will have less than 30 seconds to get his/her attention. Get to the point quickly. Answer the question: "Why should this reporter be interested?" and tailor your pitch accordingly. For example, look into regional, the public health, or the science angles of a story, as opposed to a straight "environmental" pitch.
- **Practice:** Before calling the media, write out and practice your pitch on someone who is not a member of your organization to see if they understand what you are saying and if they think it is interesting.
- **Respect deadlines:** Media calls are best made in the morning or early afternoon when most reporters are not on deadline. Always ask if the reporter is on deadline before you begin. If they are, ask when a better time would be to call. Exceptions to the rule are radio and TV talk shows. Call when the show is not on the air.
- **Be direct:** Tell the reporter why you are calling - "I saw your story on... and I thought you might be interested in something my organization is doing about this problem," or "I'm calling to let you know about a new report on XXX."
- **Be ready:** Have your talking points and the appropriate information in front of you, including statistics and spokesperson information so you do not sound disorganized. Be specific. Do not say, "We are doing interesting things." Instead say, "We have a new report that found higher levels of air pollution in the Cleveland metro area in 1999, than in the previous decade."
- **Relate:** Tie the story to something timely or newsworthy - "As you know, the U.S. Congress is considering cutting back on clean air regulations. If this happens, it will mean XX for (the media outlet's geographic area)..."
- **Be honest:** If you don't know the answer to a question the reporter raises, tell them that you do not know but that you will try and find out for them and call back. Do not make up answers or speak off the cuff. Anything you say is on the record so choose your words carefully. Say something like, "I'm not sure about that. Is it alright if I find out and call you back?"
- **Be flexible:** If a reporter is on deadline and is brusque, do not let it shake you. It is essential in this situation that you respond courteously to their situation by offering to call back, ask when would be the best time to call back, find out if you can fax the

information, etc. Others may be brusque even when not on deadline. Do not take it personally.

- **Your info:** Offer to provide additional information and background materials. These should expand the portrait of your organization and its activities, as well as the positive role played by the entire sector.
- **Their info:** If the reporter asks you to fax something, confirm their fax number. Many organizations change their fax numbers frequently. Follow up with a fax immediately.
- **Follow up:** When not working on a same-day press briefing, make a commitment for the next step: set up an interview, send/fax follow-up materials, call the reporter back with more information after a certain time period, etc.
- **Try and re-try:** Share what is working about your media "pitch" - and what is not working - with your colleagues. It may take a couple of calls to get your pitch down, and when you find what works, share it.
- **Know your stuff:** Be prepared to have conversations with reporters who know a lot about the issue. If you finish your 30-second pitch and cannot answer reporters' inquiries, you will not be able to sell your story. Reporters want to be sure you know what you are talking about. Remember that your pitch should be simple, interesting, short and clear. But, your knowledge should go to a deeper level.
- **Track it:** Keep a log with good notes about your press outreach. Record reporters' interests, key questions; note what the next steps are. Does the reporter want more information? Do you need to make a follow-up call in a few days? Record any follow-up activities on the log.
- **Abort? Retry? Fail?** If a reporter says no, respect it. Do not keep harping or bothering him/her about the same story or angle. No does not mean "don't ever call me again." It just means do not call again with the same pitch/story. Do not be afraid to call another time with a new story, a very interesting new angle, breaking news, etc.

### **Fielding Incoming Calls**

When receiving press calls, make sure anyone who may answer the phone is prepared to take careful messages. Get the name, number, and organization calling, as well as their deadline. If you do not have the information right in front of you, do not hesitate to ask the reporter if you can call right back with some answers, someone to talk to, etc. Always remember: an imminent deadline should receive an immediate call back from the appropriate spokesperson.

Have only trained people answer press inquiries. Do not let an untrained person field press questions. Have them take a very specific message, and have the right person call back.

Also, when receiving calls, you may have the opportunity to try a new angle, or tell the longer story to further interest a reporter, or to get them to cover your side of the story more in-depth. Other reporters may call you looking for information to write a story when they are unable to attend.

### **Leaving Messages**

Reporters are hardly ever at their desks - although your chances are best in the morning. Do not hesitate to leave brief messages for reporters outlining your pitch. You can do this more than once, but try not to leave more than two messages. Try to keep your pitch very short, ask them to call, offer to fax info, and say that you will call back. If you wait until you get every single reporter on the phone before giving your pitch, you may face an empty press event.

## **Sample Pitches** *Courtesy of Fenton Communications*

Your job is to take the most interesting and timely aspects of the story and condense them into 30 seconds or less, including a brief introduction of yourself. Check out these sample pitches:

### ***Report release with regional angles***

"A report coming out next Tuesday names cities with the most pot-holed and deteriorated expressways. This is the first report to outline how much money poorly maintained roads are costing drivers. It turns out that drivers spend four times more repairing the damage to their cars caused by crumbling urban expressways than state highway departments spend each year to fix them. But, states continue to divert maintenance funds to build new highways, rather than fixing the ones that are in bad shape."

Details of the press conference . . .

### ***Background briefing for features that also has several hard news hooks.***

Two reporters from a Fox TV station in Tampa will talk about pressure from Monsanto. They did an investigative piece on Bovine Growth Hormone in Florida that revealed some of the Health Canada science. Monsanto found out about their story and pressured the Fox network in New York. The reporters were asked to change their story in ways they thought were "false, inaccurate." After more than 70 rewrites, they were fired. They are now suing the TV station and filing a complaint with the FCC.

Talking about human health concerns: Monsanto's own studies have linked BGH to cysts in rats, illness in cows

Talking about FDA approval: Officially approved in 1993. These old Monsanto studies documenting health risks are now coming public because of the Health Canada review.

On Tuesday the (organization) will demand that the (decision-maker) take (GE product) off the market or face a lawsuit.

Details of who/where/when.....

## Writing Effective Letters to the Editor

Letters to the editor are an easy way to voice your opinion to policy makers and to educate people in your community about the issues your organization addresses. You can use letters to correct or interpret facts in response to an inaccurate or biased article recently published in a newspaper or magazine; to explain the connection between a news item and your organization's issues; or to praise or criticize a recent article or editorial. Whatever your purpose, your letter will reach many people in your community - without exception, the letters section is one of the most highly read segments of newspapers (and magazines).

Letter writing can also be an empowering activity for volunteers. Seeing their name published in the paper can give your volunteers a real feeling of ownership over their involvement in this issue, and can be a small victory that can build confidence and commitment for the volunteer. Consider holding monthly letter writing parties for volunteers, where people can come together, write letters to the editor (or to elected officials or other targets, as needed in your campaigns), and get to know each other.

*The majority of this information can be found at the 20/20 Vision web site.*

### Steps to Success

#### Step 1: Know Your Paper's Policy

Find out the newspaper's (or magazine's) policy for printing letters. Some have requirements for length of letters, some want letters to be typewritten, and almost all require that you include your name, address, and phone number. (Of course your address and phone number would never be printed. Most publications will want to call you before they print your letter to confirm that you really did write the letter and that you want to have it published.)

If the paper does not publish its letters requirements next to the letters it prints, do not be afraid to call. Ask to whom you should address your letter, if they have any length restrictions and in what format they would like the letter.

#### Step 2: Be Timely

Responding to a recent article, editorial, or op-ed is one of the best ways to increase your chances of getting published. (Be sure to mention the name of the article and the date it was written in the beginning of your letter.) You can also capitalize on recent news, events, or anniversaries.

#### Step 3: Keep it Simple

You already know how to write letters to policy makers that are concise, informative, and personal. The same should be true with letters to the editor. Make your first sentence short, compelling, and catchy. Do not be afraid to be direct, engaging, and even controversial. Keep your points short and clear, stick to one subject, and, as a general rule, try to limit your letters to under three or four paragraphs in length. Most publications ask that letters be kept to 250 words or less. The shorter the letter, the better its chances of being printed.

#### Step 4: Get Personal

Newspapers, at their core, are community entities. Editors will be much more likely to publish a letter, and the letter will have much more impact, if it demonstrates local relevance.

- Use local statistics. For example, a letter focusing on a vote on the Clean Water Act should point out how many rivers and lakes are unsafe for swimming in your community or state.
- Use personal stories. For example, if you or someone in your family has become ill because of contaminated drinking water, you should talk about your experience in a letter to the editor addressing the Safe Drinking Water Act.
- Use names. As congressional aides have repeatedly told us, if a letter to the editor mentions a Representative or Senator's name, they will see it. They care about how they are being perceived in the district, and they will pay attention to a letter that asks them to co-sponsor legislation, or to take a specific action in Congress. You should also urge your readers to support your position and to let their elected officials know their views.
- Use your credentials. If you have expertise in the area you are writing about, say it!

### **Step 5: Increase Name Recognition**

Letters to the editor are an excellent opportunity to let more people know about your issue. As a general rule, you should sign your letter to the editor with your affiliation. On the other hand, if you and many other representatives from your organization are writing letters to the editor as part of a targeted campaign, you may not want to include your affiliation. Publications will not print letters they think are part of a manufactured campaign.

If you are the only one writing to the editor, you may also want to work your organization's name into the text of your letter. For example, in a letter about food safety standards you could say that, "The (your organization) recommended guidelines for improving food safety standards to protect our children just last year."

### **Step 6: Don't Forget the Follow-up**

Do not be discouraged if your letter is not printed. Keep trying. You can even submit a revised letter with a different angle on the issue at a later date. And if your letter is published, be sure to send the clipped version to your member of Congress as well! While your representative or senator will probably have clipped your letter, it carries more weight if it comes from you with a personal note attached.

### **Steps 7: Think Strategically**

You should think about letters to the editor as a regular strategic campaign tool to increase the effectiveness of your organization's actions. Try to target several different papers in your area at the same time and encourage people to explore different angles on the same issue. However, do not send the exact same letter to more than one newspaper in the same market. If you want to be published in more than one paper in the same market, rewrite the letter slightly or choose a different angle to approach the subject at each publication. Newspapers do not like to print "form" letters.

Then, consider sending copies of your letters to the individuals or groups you are trying to influence; for instance, send a copy to your target legislator, to the superintendent of schools, or to the manager of the farmer's market you are trying to move to be GMO-free. Use your letters to bring you closer to your campaign goals.

*"It is especially good if the letters are geographically spread and the issue is repeated in a few areas. It creates a ripple effect. It shows that the issue has reached far into the congressional district which, in turn, gets noticed by the policy maker." - Congressional Aide*

## **Sample letter to the editor**

*Disclose location of genetically engineered crops*

September 14, 2003  
The Editor  
Honolulu Advertiser

Thank you for your recent article (“EPA Fines Pioneer for Genetic Contamination,” September 12, 2002) about the safety hazards posed by genetically engineered crops here in Hawai’i.

Hawai’i has more permitted field trials of experimental genetically engineered crops than any other place on earth. Given the number of permits our state Department of Agriculture has granted to biotechnology companies to grow these experimental crops in the islands, I was particularly concerned to learn that Pioneer Hi-Bred and Dow Agrosiences were fined by the EPA for violating safe planting restrictions on Kauai and Molokai.

These mistakes make it clear that it is necessary for the public to have a right to know where genetically engineered crops are being grown in our islands, and exactly what genetic experiments are being done here.

All farmers, gardeners and growers should know if there are fields of genetically altered crops nearby that could contaminate the food they grow. Here in the islands, biotech companies are doing experiments in which human genes and animal genes are inserted into crops. Isure don't want these things in my garden.

Now that we know mistakes have been made in how experimental genetically engineered crops are being grown in Hawai’i, it is imperative that our local and state politicians move these companies to publicly disclose where they are growing GMOs in the islands, and what genetic experiments they are doing here. We just deserve to know.

Noli Hoyer

GMO-Free Kauai  
Hanalei, Kaua’i

*Drawn from the Green Media Toolshed Media Training Program, [www.greenmediatoolshed.org](http://www.greenmediatoolshed.org)*

## Opinion Editorials

If you have tried and failed to get your paper's editorial board to take up your cause on the editorial page, or if they have decided to write an editorial condemning your cause, it may be time to write your own piece. The “op-ed” (opinion editorial) page is the place to try to publish your commentary.

Guest commentaries are articles that appear opposite the editorial page of local, state and national newspapers. Many op-eds are written by syndicated columnists or the paper's own columnists; however, they are also written by local citizens, experts, leaders of organizations - people like you. They are an extremely powerful and cost-effective way for your organization to educate a large number of people about your issues and to influence policymakers.

### Who reads opinion pieces?

National opinion articles are usually read by policymakers, academics, and important decision-makers. If your goal is to reach the general public, an op-ed in a national paper such as the New York Times is not the best approach. To reach the public in a specific region, submit your piece to the local/regional paper. Finally, there are national chains, such as Knight-Ridder, that will run an op-ed. A piece like this may appear in local and regional papers all over the country.

### Do Your Homework

Although most newspapers consider it a priority to maintain open access to their opinion pages, not all papers are receptive to publishing guest pieces from anyone, especially special interest groups. If you want to write on behalf of your organization, it is important to know the paper's policy. It is important to read the paper you wish to approach, find out whether or not it publishes guest columns, how frequently it does so and whether it prefers to publish columns by policymakers, "celebrity" journalists, academics, or other types of authors.

You should also read the paper regularly to understand the editorial direction of the paper. Papers may see no need for a guest column unless it is filling some void. They will not print a guest column that is merely echoing what another columnist has already written or what has already been articulated by the paper in an editorial. In fact, your best bet may be to write a column that takes direct exception to an editorial.

### Contacting the Paper

When approaching a small newspaper, you may be dealing with the editorial page editor or the chief editor. At a larger paper, however, you may be referred to the op-ed page editor. Once you know what you want to write, you should try discussing it with the person in charge of op-eds or commentaries. Explain what you want to write in response to something that has been printed in the paper, or that you want to express your views on an ongoing subject. Ask them their opinion, take any guidance they are willing to offer, but remember that they may be strapped for time like any other reporter. Many large newspapers also have recorded messages outlining their guidelines for submitting op-eds. Do not be surprised if you are transferred to this line.

Before writing a piece, make sure you get all the information you need from the newspaper:

1. Word length
2. How to submit
3. Whom to submit to

4. How long submissions are held on to/considered and how to find out whether it has been accepted for publication
5. Details on how to withdraw submissions

### **Timing is Everything**

Timing is the most important factor in submitting an op-ed. Is Congress or the state legislature about to cast a controversial vote? Is there an appropriate holiday or anniversary? Can you tie the op-ed to the release of a new report, a recent article, a popular movie, or event in your community? In many cases, it is best to submit your op-ed well in advance of a timely event, such as a news anniversary or important vote because editors plan their opinion pages a week or more in advance. When reacting to a news event, submit your piece as quickly as possible afterwards - no more than a week after it has been covered by the newspaper, preferably within two or three days.

### **Writing an Op-Ed**

Start by outlining what you want to write - not only the issue but the point of view you want to take. Consider what the paper has already printed on the subject and decide how you could best contribute to the debate. Again, unless you want to write for the New York Times, or another major national outlet, the local angle is your best bet. Even international issues such as climate change have local impact.

#### *Tips:*

- Keep your text to between 500 and 800 words (about 3 pages double-spaced) in general, but call the outlet you plan to submit it to for their guidelines.
- Stay focused on one issue, and boil your argument down to three or, at the most, four major points.
- Think creatively and try to be original. (Tip: read op-eds before starting so you see how they are styled.)
- Highlight the issue's relevance. How/why has it been in the news? What's so controversial?
- Write in short paragraphs; three sentences each.
- Use simple, short sentences. Avoid fancy words, jargon, or acronyms.
- Eliminate the passive voice. Example: "This legislation was defeated almost entirely by the governor." Changed to: "The governor single-handedly defeated the bill."
- Begin with a short vignette illustrating how the issue affects an individual or group of people to drive home why the newspaper's readers "need to know."
- For regional placement, use local or regional statistics. For example, in an op-ed focusing on the Clean Water Act, you should mention the number of lakes, rivers or streams in your state that are unsafe for swimming.
- Include at least one memorable phrase that can be used as a "pull" quote. It must be short.
- Op-eds should provoke discussion, controversy and response.
- Op-eds should be informative and provide practical solutions for the problem you have presented.
- Close on a strong note. Use a short, powerful last paragraph that drives the point home and sums things up.
- Don't forget to thank the editor, or whomever you are dealing with at the paper, for publishing your op-ed piece. A good relationship with the editorial staff could become one of your most valuable resources. (But don't include your note of thanks in the op-ed itself).

- Include a cover letter when submitting an op-ed that summarizes why it is timely and of interest to readers of this particular publication. Thank the editors for considering your piece. Keep the letter short - less than one page.

### **The Right Author**

You do not necessarily have to sign or write an op-ed by yourself. Sometimes it is best to ask a government official or expert to collaborate on an opinion piece. Finding the best author to collaborate with can be critical in getting your article published and maximizing its impact. Choose from scientific or other experts from your organization or others, ask a local doctor, business executive, or elected official - anyone who may be perceived as having an interesting perspective on the issues or the appropriate credentials for weighing in on a topic. For example, a retired Energy Department official would carry more clout discussing the potential impacts of energy sector deregulation than a known renewable energy or environmental activist. The best person (or persons) to collaborate with on an op-ed are not always experts on writing for the media. However, when revising the text, be sure that everyone who collaborates on and signs an opinion piece has the opportunity for revision and fact-checking.

### **Formatting an Op-Ed**

- Double space your text.
- Provide a suggested title, the author's name, and identification - although it will most likely be re-named.
- You may want to include a short biographical paragraph about the author at the end, including residence and experience relevant to the topic.
- Consider illustrating your piece with a photograph, map, or other visual aid. It is a good idea to maintain a good file of black-and-white shots.

*Adapted from Green Media Toosheld's piece, drawn from "Op-Eds: A Cost-Effective Strategy for Advocacy," by Denice Zeck and Edmund Rennolds. This guide is part of the series, "Strategic Communication for Nonprofits" published by the Benton Foundation and the Center for Strategic Communications.*

### **Sample Op-Ed #1**

#### **Turning Point for California's Farm Industry Industry aims to strip local control of food supply**

Britt Bailey, Becky Tarbotton

Wednesday, July 20, 2005

Environmental and healthy-farming advocates are learning what tobacco-free campaigners learned in the 1990s: When local governments step up to protect their community's citizens, industry responds by taking away the authority of local governments.

In spring 2004, three California counties and two cities passed ordinances that restricted growing genetically modified organisms. In response, state Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter (Kern County), earlier this month gutted and then amended Senate Bill 1056 with some of the broadest and most

sweeping pre-emptive language ever written in the Legislature. Its purpose? To override existing local restrictions, prohibit any future initiatives that might restrict genetically engineered crops and eliminate local control of seeds and plants. Essentially, to hijack control of our food supply.

Just as the tobacco industry acted to restrict local tobacco controls in 20 states, agribusiness corporations and their affiliated associations are behind the moves to thwart local efforts to restrict the growing of genetically modified foods. In the 2005 session, 16 state legislatures, including California, introduced bills prohibiting local control of seeds and plants. The nearly identical language used in each of the bills illustrates a systematic and ordered approach to stifling community decision-making. Agribusiness councils, whose leadership includes members such as bioengineering firms Monsanto and Syngenta, are promoting the legislation while the bills' initial language has been developed by the American Legislative Exchange Council, a conservative public-policy organization.

What will such pre-emptive laws do to local control? According to Tom Campbell, director of the California Department of Finance, "state pre-emption laws can do two things. They can overturn the will of the people in the event an initiative has passed, and they can prevent the introduction of laws on the same subject from being introduced in the future." Pre-empting local authority stifles citizen participation in the democratic process and should give pause for any legislator or citizen. What are voters in Mendocino and Marin counties to think when their votes to restrict genetically modified crops and protect local food and farming are worthy of so little respect?

There is no denying that agricultural biotechnology is a complex and controversial issue. You would think this would be all the more reason public debate and discussion should be encouraged, not silenced. Yet if legislators such as Florez have their way, citizens will lose an opportunity to be part of the discussion to resolve one of the most challenging issues of our time. Local initiatives and citizen actions restricting genetically modified crops are a signal to the Legislature that Californians are concerned about this new technology and, in the absence of government leadership, are taking matters into their own hands to protect their environment, economy and health.

Proponents of SB1056 assert that California needs uniformity and homogeneity with regard to seed laws and that the state could not possibly handle a patchwork of laws passed by local government. Yet, if local authority over seeds is taken away by the state, then so is every farmer's choice not to use genetically engineered seeds and plants. Once genetically engineered plants are released into the environment, historically preserved and heirloom seed strains are forever affected, according to a 2004 report by the Union of Concerned Scientists. Diverse agricultural economies may suffer from losses due to this contamination. For example, if organic crops become contaminated with genetically engineered pollen, those farmers may lose their organic certification.

In 1787, Thomas Jefferson wrote a letter to James Madison in which he stated, "I know of no safe repository of the ultimate power of society but the people, and if we think them not enlightened enough, the remedy is not to take the power from them." That critical power is now being challenged, as state Sen. Wes Chesbro, D-Arcata (Humboldt County), noted: "Regardless of how you feel about the (genetically modified organism) issue, taking away local voters' rights is a serious threat to democracy."

Please voice your opposition to SB1056, which impedes our ability as community members to protect and create a sustainable food supply. Contact your legislator (to find out who that is, go

to [leginfo.ca.gov/yourleg.html](http://leginfo.ca.gov/yourleg.html)), Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata ([senator.perata@sen.ca.gov](mailto:senator.perata@sen.ca.gov)) and Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez ([assemblymember.nunez@assembly.ca.gov](mailto:assemblymember.nunez@assembly.ca.gov)). This legislation does not represent the freedoms our country was founded upon.

Britt Bailey is director of Environmental Commons in Gualala (Mendocino County) and environmental policy instructor at the College of Marin in Kentfield. For updated information on the seed and plant pre-emption bills, visit [www.environmentalcommons.org/gmo-tracker.html](http://www.environmentalcommons.org/gmo-tracker.html). Becky Tarbotton is campaign coordinator for Californians for GE-Free Agriculture ([www.calfree.org](http://www.calfree.org)), a statewide coalition promoting ecologically and economically viable agriculture.

Sample Op-Ed #2

## **Falsities, half-truths and smears marred essay on Tillamook milk**

Thursday, March 31, 2005

**IN MY OPINION Rick North**

**Dr. Martin Donohoe**

A recent op-ed piece by Alex Avery and Terry Witt ("Contriving a controversy concerning Tillamook's milk," March 25) questioned the legitimacy of Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility's campaign to discontinue recombinant bovine growth hormone -- rBGH or rBST -- in dairy products.

Our organization, which prides itself on sound science, has intensively researched the scientific data and historical/political information on rBGH.

We discovered a deeply disturbing web of undue corporate influence in the Food and Drug Administration, where several of the agency's own scientists questioned the validity of the data and safety of rBGH. We learned why rBGH has been banned in most industrialized nations of the world and we saw how Monsanto, rBGH's sole manufacturer, intimidated many who opposed it.

Last week's op-ed was more than an attempt to silence the continuing controversy about the safety of this drug. It was an assault on citizen participation in democracy, on activism itself.

Our dictionary defines an activist as someone who takes "positive, direct action to achieve an end." In the past few years, the meaning of this word has been turned on its head to imply a negative, self-serving person. The prevailing definition disparages citizens who question corporate power or official government policy. It's illuminating to track those people criticizing activism and recognize their tactics.

One such tactic is the half-truth. Their op-ed gave the impression that our campaign had targeted Tillamook County Creamery with thousands of complaints and was wholly responsible for its decision. Actually, Tillamook had received comments about rBGH and had begun discussions about banning it before our campaign had even started. In the past year, we have asked consumers to urge Tillamook and other dairies to stop using the hormone. However, the thousands of comments we helped generate in the 10 days leading up to the membership vote were thanking Tillamook for its previous rBGH-free decision.

The op-ed also contained numerous totally false statements. One example: rBGH doesn't harm cows? Monsanto's own package insert lists more than a dozen harmful medical conditions that rBGH increases, including painful mastitis, foot disorders and reduced pregnancy rates. It's no wonder both the Humane Society of the United States and the Humane Farming Association have condemned rBGH.

Monsanto has funded, directly or indirectly, both Avery's Hudson Institute and Witt's Oregonians for Food and Shelter. In fact, Monsanto has a representative sitting on the board of Witt's group.

Activists are more than just watchdogs. They have produced some of this nation's greatest accomplishments. Without them, 10-year-old children would still be working 12 hours a day in coal mines and sweatshops. Blacks would still be barred from schools, hotels and swimming pools. Women would still be denied the right to vote. In Oregon, activist William Steel spearheaded a 17-year struggle that led to the creation in 1902 of Crater Lake National Park. Activist Richard Chambers led the three-year battle for the 1971 Bottle Bill that became a nationwide model.

It is the right and responsibility of citizens to question government policy and challenge abuses of corporate power. When activism is attacked or neglected, democracy itself is in peril.

Avery and Witt got one thing right -- we are activists. And we're proud of it.

Rick North of Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility is project director for its Campaign for Safe Food. Dr. Martin Donohoe, a physician, is the campaign's chief science adviser.