

# Toolkit

## Best Practices for Media Engagement



Building relationships with journalists long before Election Day can foster a mutually beneficial environment of trust and transparency that ultimately benefits the audience that both election administrators and reporters serve: the voting public. Trusted relationships with journalists can also help to expeditiously knock down bogus claims when they go viral and you want timely news coverage to assist. This toolkit contains general guidelines, best practices, and tips around: [building media relationships](#), [earning coverage](#), [preparing for interviews](#), [staying on track during interviews](#), and [following up afterwards](#).

## Building Media Relationships

Activity	Steps to Consider
<b>Reach Out to Reporters on the Elections Beat</b>	<p>In most newsrooms, the same reporters typically get assigned to cover elections, voting and politics. This is known as their beat, a topic area in which they're responsible for tracking developments and developing sources (other beats often include criminal justice/law enforcement, health, business, sports, etc).</p> <p>Reach out to the reporters you notice often covering election-related topics in the newsrooms in your local market, those in print, television, radio and digital platforms. Begin by letting them know you appreciate their coverage and ask how you can help.</p>
<b>Pitch Reporters Proactively</b>	<p>Rather than wait for journalists to call you with the story-of-the-day, look for stories you can proactively pitch them. This allows you to help drive a narrative of the safe, secure and transparent way your office administers elections in your community.</p> <p>Pitches can generally be categorized by type:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Tied to a date on the calendar: National Voter Registration Day, National Poll Worker Recruitment Day, or a voter registration deadline in your area.</li><li>• About something new in your office: new voting equipment, fresh-off-the-printing-press ballots arriving, ways you verify absentee ballot signatures, or a groundswell of concern you're noticing from voters that you'd like to debunk, etc.</li><li>• Explanatory stories about upcoming events: how voters will learn of unofficial election results, how your staff will canvas after the elections, how certification works, etc.</li><li>• Logistics about high-profile stories: How you train your staff for Election Day, how you recruit poll workers, etc.</li></ul> <p>Do not assume journalists (and therefore the public) already know all of this because it's repeated every two or four years. Just like there can be turnover in election offices, there is constant turnover in newsrooms – and among registered voters living in a community. Look at every election cycle as a new opportunity to educate the community on election literacy.</p> <p>Pitching proactive stories is a proven way to build a relationship with a journalist. You become a go-to expert, elevating your trusted status in the community.</p>

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## Tips for Earning Coverage

Activity	Steps to Consider
<b>Think Visually</b>	<p>When pitching a story to a journalist, think visually. Data and process are not enough. What visually can you show the journalist – and, therefore, the public? If allowed by your office, and with appropriate voter identification safeguards, consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Inviting a photojournalist to get video or still images of poll workers training, election equipment testing and validation, prep for mailing out absentee ballots, etc.</li><li>• Inviting reporters to go through (truncated) poll worker training, how to verify a voter’s registration, or other key steps in the administration of elections.</li><li>• Being creative! Ask the local high school to ‘borrow’ their marching band to accompany you to a TV studio for National Voter Registration Day. Do a grand unveiling of a new ‘I Voted’ sticker. Do a reveal of what your office will spend new election security monies on to improve the voting experience.</li></ul> <p>Think of ways to create engaging visual elements to your pitches. This will endear you to the journalists you’re trying to build a relationship with and increase the chance a newsroom will cover the story you’re suggesting.</p>
<b>Be Responsive</b>	<p>Journalists often contact people ‘on deadline,’ which means they may only have a few hours before to compile the information into a story. They may even contact you after hours, or on weekends about a story or claim that’s going viral on social media.</p> <p>The journalist will be forever grateful if you respond to their inquiry promptly and will increase the chance your perspective and voice is included in the final story. Journalists know you have many other duties. But you are the trusted source of information about elections, and you want to encourage journalists to come to you.</p> <p>So always aim to respond to a journalist as quickly as possible; within the hour is ideal. Even if you only respond to say you don’t have the information they’re seeking or cannot do an interview that day, that response is still helpful and will strengthen the relationship you’re trying to build.</p>

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## Preparing for the Interview

Activity	Steps to Consider
<b>Looking the Part</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Keep a blouse or blazer in your office in case you have an unexpected interview.</li><li>● Wear solid colors. Dark and jewel tones are best. Avoid patterns, all white, and shiny fabric.</li><li>● Choose clothes that fit well and make you feel confident.</li><li>● Avoid flashy jewelry or accessories (i.e., long earrings may be distracting if they move while you speak).</li><li>● Confirm with the photographer they have good lighting. Have a blank white sheet of paper handy to help photographers set “white balance” (a camera setting that allows colors to appear accurate and natural).</li></ul>
<b>Setting up the Logistics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● If the interview is at your office, think of a few quiet locations with limited foot traffic where the crew can set up.</li><li>● Confirm the interview format with the reporter: length, how the station will use the footage, etc.</li><li>● Give yourself plenty of time to get comfortable with the environment and make any necessary adjustments.</li><li>● (microphone placement, camera angles, lighting, etc.)</li><li>● Do not sit in a chair that swivels or rolls on wheels.</li></ul>
<b>Thinking Through Your Message</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Identify three key messages you want to get across during the interview, and stick to those. Include data whenever possible. Eight seconds is the average length of a TV sound bite, and it’s hard to phrase important information that succinctly on the fly.</li><li>● Practice the messages with a colleague, friend, or communications professional in your network.</li><li>● Do mock interviews or watch past interviews you’ve done to identify strengths and areas of improvement.</li><li>● Ask the reporter if there’s an angle they plan to take for this interview - i.e., whether it’s part of a bigger story</li></ul>

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## During the Interview

Activity	Steps to Consider
<b>1. Establish Attribution Rules Early</b>	<p>Before a conversation with a journalist begins, set the attribution ground rules:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● On-the-record: The gold standard and the one most preferred by reporters because they can utilize the information and quotes for maximum transparency with the audience.</li><li>● On background: The reporter can use the information and/or quotes, but not attribute it to you by name. In this instance, you can negotiate how the journalist describes the type of person the information is coming from (example: “An election administrator in Nebraska says...”). Many initial meetings with reporters begin on background.</li><li>● On deep background: The reporter can use the information but with no attribution whatsoever.</li><li>● Off-the-record: The reporter cannot use any information you provide unless they get it elsewhere independently. This is very, very tricky for a reporter to work with.</li></ul>
<b>2. Speak Effectively</b>	<p><b>Use plain language:</b> The journalist you’re talking with may have covered a COVID-19 story the day before your interview and a crime story the day before that. Explain election concepts in an easily-understood manner and constantly ask the journalist if what you’re explaining makes sense or if they’d like additional clarification or details. Use vocabulary that would be easily understood by the journalist’s audience (e.g. counting instead of tabulation, etc); avoid jargon and acronyms.</p> <p><b>Speak in complete sentences:</b> This is because the reporter’s question may be edited out, especially in TV interviews. Often, you and the reporter will go over questions before the interview - you may even answer some questions off-camera. During the real interview, avoid phrases like “as I said earlier,” because the viewer wasn’t there.</p> <p><b>Be succinct:</b> Deliver the message - and just the message. Pause...instead of using filler words like “um.” For a little extra time at the start of an answer, you may summarize the reporter’s question. Avoid talking just to fill a silence. If you finish answering, no need to continue speaking if the reporter hasn’t asked another one yet. If the interview goes off track, it’s okay to politely steer the conversation back to your key messages.</p>
<b>3. Remember that you’re the expert...</b>	<p>As the interview subject, and trusted official, you’re in charge of the interview. Journalists have their questions, but you have your answers. If a journalist asks you a question you don’t want to answer, instead of saying “I don’t want to answer that” or “no comment,” acknowledge the question and then pivot to what you want to answer. With practice, this will be seamless and not awkward or uncomfortable. Avoid being defensive, and when possible, give journalists the benefit of doubt that their questions are genuine.</p>

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<b>4. ...and, remember that you're not the expert on all things.</b>	Just as an election administrator would not speculate about brain surgery, do not speculate about election-related topics that are not in your wheelhouse or are conducted in jurisdictions other than yours, as they may have different rules and procedures. When asked, try not to judge the actions of other election administrators – especially if you are not intimately familiar with the circumstances. Instead, focus on industry best practices and principles.
<b>5. Stay Focused</b>	Don't get distracted by messages or other intrusions. <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Maintain eye contact: look at the reporter, not the camera.</li><li>● Sit or stand upright. Natural gestures are good!</li><li>● If you typically talk fast, slow down. The more rushed or under pressure you're feeling, the more you should slow down.</li></ul>

## Additional tips to remember:

### When in Doubt, Promise a Follow-Up

If a journalist asks you a question and you don't know the answer, simply acknowledge the question, that you want to get the journalist the answer and you'll follow up with them with a specific time frame. Be sure to get their contact information and ask their deadline – then pledge to follow up with plenty of time to meet that deadline. Often, reporters don't choose their deadlines; they're assigned them by the editors. Once set, deadlines are often immovable and not at the reporter's discretion.

### Avoid Mud Fights

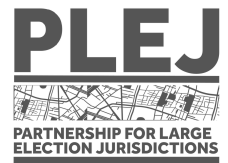
A journalist may ask you to respond to a newsworthy quote or a viral claim. Stick to the facts of the claim – not the propriety of whether the speaker should have said it in the first place. As trusted officials, you want to stay out of mud fights and stay above the fray. Only weigh in on controversial topics or claims with a non-judgemental, fact-based approach. Be aware that whatever response you give, the reporter may take back to the original source of the claim and read it verbatim for the speaker's reaction. Therefore, the more fact-based, non-hyperbolic and nonpartisan the better, to avoid getting into a virtual back-and-forth.

### It's OK to Say 'No'

Just because a reporter asks for an interview does not mean you need to grant it. Some interviews will align perfectly with your messaging goals and you'll want to engage. Other interview requests may carry too much risk or not be appropriate or beneficial for you to take part. When declining an interview, you can tell the journalist to feel free to reach out in the future if you can be of assistance on a future story. That keeps the door open to further engagement.

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## After the Interview



Activity	Steps to Consider
<b>Follow up, follow up, follow up</b>	<p>Always follow up with a journalist after the story runs. If you liked the story, compliment the reporter and tell them what you liked about it. If there was an inaccuracy or context that was missing, find a way to diplomatically and graciously point that out and offer to provide more information to clear up any misunderstanding. Know that almost always, the reporter who interviewed you <i>does not</i> write the headline of the story on the news outlet’s website or in the newspaper. That’s an editor’s job. And just because you may not have written the story the way the reporter did, try to <b>only focus on items that are inaccurate or wrong</b> for correction or adjustment – avoid nitpicking style or tone, if the reporting is factually accurate.</p> <p>Give the reporter the benefit of the doubt as you work to build a relationship. Like all relationships, some will be fruitful and long-lasting; others, of course, will just not be productive, no matter the effort you put into it.</p> <p>Following up after each and every story conveys an interest in the journalist’s work, an attention to detail, and demonstrates your interest in working together in the future. It may even be an opportunity to pitch your next great election-related story!</p>