

Chapter 6 Get The Message Out

There are many things that can be done to get out the Democratic message in your community:

Outreach: Attend meetings of other organizations, offer to give guest speeches, and participate when they have community forums, etc.

Letters to the Editor: Writing letters to the editor is an effective way to influence public opinion. Newspapers are more likely to publish a letter from a local resident than from the Communications Director of the Texas Democratic Party or even from an elected official.

Utilize Technology - Internet Web Pages, Blogs, Webcasting, E-mail Distribution Lists, Cell Phones, Pagers, and Text Messaging: Websites, blogs, webcasting and distributing information via e-mail distribution lists, cell phones, pagers and text messaging are excellent methods of distributing and displaying the Democratic message.

Distribute Press Releases: Press releases are used to distribute a Democratic message or invite the media to an event.

Call Radio Talk Shows: Call in to local radio talk shows to talk about the Democratic message or to refute someone else's message.

Use Print and Electronic Media: Print and electronic media allow for a wide distribution of the Democratic message to people who are not Party activists.

Outreach

Many organizations share the ideals of the Democratic Party. We can build more effective organizational or message efforts by getting our “allies” involved in the effort to elect those who champion our shared priorities. These are important ways to implement this effort:

- Join and work with allied groups, get to know their leaders and members, and get them involved in Democratic efforts. Invite them to events and to meet officeholders so you can conduct press events on “shared priorities,” etc.
- Identify key “allied” leaders to serve as “credible third-party spokespersons” on behalf of our candidates, our party, and our shared message
- Encourage allied nonpartisan groups to hold bipartisan forums on their issue priorities, providing us an opportunity to deliver our majority message to the broader membership and the media

Letters to the Editor

A letter to the editor is an effective method of delivering the Democratic message and an excellent vehicle for rapid response. Guidelines for submission are typically published. Abide by their rules of style and etiquette. Generally you can say what you really feel.

Read letters to the editor to identify like-minded activists and enlist them in your cause.

Writing Guide: A good letter to the editor is like a three-act play. Set the stage in your first paragraph. Then lay out the evidence to support your point in a clear and concise manner. Finally, make your point based on the information you have outlined:

- **Write Tight:** Keep it economical—two to four paragraphs with one or two sentences per paragraph. Explain your inspiration for writing the letter or column then make your point. Do not worry about winning the Pulitzer Prize. Simply write the way you talk.
- **Stick to the Facts:** Be prepared. Make your case with solid information and facts. Use your talking points or newspaper stories you've clipped or pulled from the Internet as a background resource or primer for letters and columns.
- **Use Examples:** Examples of Democratic issues are the \$3,000 teacher pay raise and state health insurance plan for teachers, health care coverage for 600,000 uninsured children, and a prescription drug assistance program for seniors. Examples of failed Republican leadership are the insurance crisis and poor fiscal management that allowed a record state budget surplus to become a record state deficit.
- **Stay on message:** Do not get sidetracked. Stick to your central message and theme.
- **Be Confident:** Write it with pride, but don't let your emotions distract from your point.

- **Be Cool:** Even though you might not agree, respect the rights of others to express their opinions.

Technology

Internet Web Pages - Blogs - Webcasting - E-mail Distribution Lists - Cell Phones - Pagers - Text Messaging:

Electronic methods of distributing the Democratic message are relatively new but are playing an ever increasing role in the political arena. In some cases they require financial resources and/or technical expertise.

Web Page: A web page is typically developed and maintained by a web master. It should have the following:

- An eye-catching banner
- Information about the Party or organization
- Current news
- Information on how to join or participate in Party or organization activities
- Contact information
- A calendar of events
- Links to other websites and blogs
- Frequent updates to maintain “freshness”

Blog : A web log or blog is a website dedicated to posting messages typically focused on a point of view, issue or issues. Messages are controlled by a traffic manager. The blog should have the following:

- An eye-catching banner
- Information about the focus of the blog
- Information on how to register and participate in the blog
- Contact information
- Links to other websites and blogs

Webcasting: Webcasting is a method of broadcasting live or delayed audio and/or video transmissions over the Internet. Political call-in shows are becoming common. Press conferences, activities, and events can also be webcast. Webcasters utilize computers, specialized computer applications, and the Internet to produce webcasts.

Cell Phones - Pagers - Text Messaging: These technologies allow for rapid distribution of information.

Radio Talk Show Call-in

Radio talk shows allow for immediate delivery of a message or response to someone else’s message.

The caller should adhere to these guidelines:

- Remain calm and never be incited to make a rash response, no matter what
- Speak clearly at a moderate pace
- Be well informed on subject matter
- Never name-call or use profanity
- Never lie

Talk radio has emerged as a powerful medium for expressing political views and opinions. Call in and express support for the Democratic Party and its candidates. Let the talk show host know that you are “proud to be a Democrat” and remind listeners that our Party has a proven record of helping middle-class families.

Calling into a local radio talk show is very easy to do.

Many nationally syndicated programs are very conservative and in many cases have acted as unofficial “agents” of the Republican Party. They screen calls carefully, so it is not easy to “get through.”

Use Media Effectively - Print, Radio, TV and Electronic

In every community, there is a wide array of media outlets, each with its own audience and each with its own needs. Provide a media outlet with what it needs for its audience at the time it needs it, and excellent press coverage will follow.

Steps to Effective Media Relations

- Develop a **complete** media list
 - Locate every newspaper, radio station, TV station that serves the area
 - The Society for Professional Journalists may publish a media directory in large cities
 - Make a list of free newspapers
 - Make a list of professional or industry, special interest, minority, and college publications
 - Find out about local public affairs programs
 - Make a list of newsletters and websites of area Democratic clubs and affinity groups
- Develop contact information for **every** outlet
 - Get the names, addresses, phone numbers, fax numbers and e-mail addresses for a list of newsletters
 - Get the websites of area Democratic clubs and affinity groups
- Know the media
 - Make contact with and maintain relationships with editors and reporters who cover politics
 - Determine best format for each outlet [Mac vs. PC, e-mail vs. fax, etc.]
 - Schedule meetings with editorial boards once or twice a year
 - Continuously keep your contacts informed – mark FYI items to save them time
 - Get to know the reporters, develop a rapport, and maintain regular contact, even if not pushing a story or reacting to news. Know the reporters' strengths, weaknesses, and interests.
 - Who is best for investigative reporting?
 - Who covers such beats as campaigns or governmental agencies?
 - Who has the most institutional knowledge?
 - Who works fastest, slowest?
 - Which newspaper has the most manpower and reporters readily available?
- Keep volunteers and allies informed and involved
 - Make sure that everyone knows the Democratic message
 - Bring together volunteers to help with media relations
 - Use volunteers for researching the media
 - Provide other community organizations with our message
- Have a publicity plan – for the overall campaign and for each event
 - Identify individuals, community leaders and officeholders who can write columns and letters to the editor
 - Decide on a regular schedule and stick to it. For example, a letter could be sent on a weekly, semi-weekly, or monthly basis
 - Use the same approach for the electronic form of media—radio talk shows, local TV stations, etc. Call the news directors at local stations and ask to do live interviews.
 - Plan events that look good on TV, so reporters take pictures and provide news coverage, such as large, enthusiastic rallies. Put a face on the issues by having people tell compelling personal stories. Make events appealing!
 - Create a timeline for your plan, and make individuals responsible for specific tasks
 - Place a publicity schedule in the campaign timeline

Media Tips

- Keep abreast of the news
 - Scan the papers first thing every day
 - Check news websites frequently
 - Listen to radio and TV as often as you can
- Do your homework

- o Know the essential facts, but don't get bogged down in details
- o Back up your statement with information such as press clips, reports, and other materials
- Tell the truth
- Stay on message
 - o Be aware of what other Democrats are saying about the central issues
 - o Keep your answers within the framework of the Democratic Party positions on key issues
- Be aware of the basic guidelines and parameters for interviews
 - o Always assume you are "on the record"
 - o Don't be flippant or crude—anything you say could end up in print
- Be sensitive to timing. The old saying "Timing is everything" tends to hold true
 - o Know your local newspaper's deadlines and publication dates
 - o Time your events and releases with reporters' deadlines in mind
- Be proactive
 - o Don't just wait to respond to news
 - o Generate story ideas
 - o Package information to make the reporting job as simple as possible
 - o Anticipate calls and questions
- Be available. When people are regularly quoted in the press, you can be assured that is because they are very accessible, return calls, and have something quotable to say.
 - o Return calls to avoid lines in stories such as "could not be reached for comment"
 - o Do not refuse to comment
 - o When a reporter poses questions that cannot be answered sufficiently without more time and research, tell them you will call them back as soon as you can find the answers. (If you state a time by which you will respond, be sure to meet that deadline!)
 - o Be confident—speak with conviction
- Understand that TV wants events that are visual. Spanish TV wants Spanish speakers. Radio needs someone who speaks well and clearly. Print media has more space to fill, so they need more details, quotes, and pictures.
- Look at all angles of a submitted press release. Different angles appeal to different media
- Never miss an opportunity for publicity
- Never answer a question for a candidate. Refer media calls to the candidate when possible

Press Releases

Press releases alert reporters about stands on particular issues or let the media know about particular events.

Think about what you are going to write. Make it something you want to see written and would be interested in reading. It should be very detailed and contain what the reporters need to write their pieces.

Structure and Form of a Press Release

You should consider the following structure and form when writing a press release:

- Use the organization's letterhead for press releases
- Type "For Immediate Release" on the top left corner and type the date below that
- Type the contact information on the top right corner. Include name of organization and the phone numbers of two contacts. Ensure that these contacts can be reached easily. Include home numbers if appropriate. Cell phone numbers and e-mail addresses are appreciated
- Type "MORE" at the end of each page when your press release is more than a page long
- Type the contact information on successive pages as well

- Type “####” at the end of the press release. This is how journalists indicate the end of news copy.

What the Press Release Should Contain

You should do the following when writing a press release:

- Make the headline captivate the reader. Use the most important information in the headline—up to four lines if necessary. Use a subheading if needed, but keep it short. The headline and first paragraph should be where you concentrate your writing efforts. Your points should be made early in the release. Think about what is most important.
- Make pertinent and important information visible. Reporters generally glance at a press release for about 30 seconds. Keep the paragraphs short, and try to limit paragraphs to three sentences.
- Use quotes from spokespersons in the third or fourth paragraph, and summarize your organization in the last paragraph.
- Mention photo opportunity, if there is one. Be sure to send a copy of the release to the photo desk.

Distributing a Press Release

You must make sure the press release gets to the proper people:

- Send a press release a week before an event and send it again the day before the event.
- Press releases may be faxed, e-mailed or some combination of the two.
- Most importantly, make follow-up calls. Make these calls the day before or the morning of the event. Have a copy of the release handy and ready to be faxed when making these calls.

Advancing Democratic Media Events

Locations

Advance work may mean scouting out one location or many locations to find the best place for an event. It means asking questions to anticipate every possible problem. For example, if the advance person is looking for a good work site, it means identifying possible sites in a given locale, visiting those sites and asking questions.

Are there good visuals such as clearly visible machinery, a lot of workers on the site? Is it a union shop? Is there a location at the site where a candidate or a representative of the Democratic Party can speak to the workers, such as in an area of the factory floor that could be used, a cafeteria? Is it too noisy?

Is there a time when the workers change shifts or the machines are shut down? When is it busiest?

Are there any problems with the company, such as recent layoffs, union disputes, and safety violations? Is the media welcome to attend and take pictures? Is there room for the media? Is it convenient for the media, or is it out of the way and will require long travel times?

Does the location tell you anything about the substance of your event? What do you see? That’s the key test to apply when you’re planning message events. What does the location tell you about the Democratic Party or the candidate?

What people see is sometimes more important than what they hear or read. The bottom line: Think visually.

Media Event Planning Tips

You need to follow all of the following media event planning tips:

- Match your location with your subject. If you’re talking about health care, visit a health care clinic; jobs, visit a factory with workers; education, visit a classroom or job training site.
- Think big picture and small.
- Think people. You want to create events that put the Democratic Party in direct contact with people. If you visit a school, politely turn down the invitation to address the student body in the auditorium. That generally puts you on stage away from the kids. Opt for the gym or a classroom or the library. Take time to talk to individual kids, even if you have to kneel.

- Avoid distractions. Some factories are great visually, but too noisy. Some companies are willing to let you in for lunch breaks or other times when they shut down the machines.
- Think about what will be happening at your location during the time you've chosen.
- Always question crowd sizes. No doubt you'll have to ask someone how many people will be at a particular location when you're there, whether it is a factory, health clinic, lunch spot or school. Always check it out yourself. If you need 10 people and they say 10 people will be there, tell them you need 20 people. If 10 show up, you're covered. If 20 show, you're covered. Whenever possible, build or supplement a crowd yourself or double and triple check to make sure you'll have what you need.
- Get rid of the podium and you'll find you get better pictures with people involved in the subject you're covering. Whenever possible, avoid using a podium.
- Drive the day's schedule to ensure directions and travel times are correct. Do not do the test drive at midnight and assume you will make the location in the same 20 minutes. If your event takes place smack in the middle of rush hour, you'll be stuck in gridlock traffic when the event begins.

It's up to the advance person to make sure everything is as expected.

Did you anticipate a crowd at the senior center, but when you arrived everyone was gone on a field trip? No one was there except the media? Plan for alternatives. Do you have supporters in the area who can quickly build a senior crowd at the location? Can you move your event to another nearby location? Is there senior housing nearby where you can go door-to-door to talk to seniors?

An advance person must be absolutely unshakable—never appearing rattled, nervous, worried, anxious, short-tempered, or rude. Every crisis must be taken in stride and addressed efficiently, professionally, and politely.

Crisis Management

Media encounters can be pressure-filled events with rules, time limits, and even the occasional “cheap shot.” The twists and turns of a media situation can never be fully anticipated, but with discipline it is possible to maximize your control of the variables through a combination of knowledge, attitude, and strategy. The Texas Democratic Party, the county chair, the county executive committee, and the various candidate campaign offices should be consulted for the message.

Ensure that everyone understands how to respond in a crisis. For example, if you know protesters are coming to your event, try to arrange the site so those protesters cannot get close to the candidates. If you do not expect protesters, but they show up, do your best to isolate them in the rear of your event; get your crowd to drown them out; and if necessary, alert security or other officials.

What if the opposition shows up at your event or news conference? Generally, ignoring event-busters is the best advice. If that does not work, politely engaging them or inviting them to speak when you're done may work. Pushing, shoving, shouting, slamming doors, locking people out, or generating a confrontation or fight generally does not accomplish anything positive. It does ensure a spot on the news, simply not the one you wanted.

National Campaigns

National campaigns rarely communicate directly with local media as they typically care more about getting coverage in big papers, such as the *New York Times*. Therefore, it is important to maintain good relations with local media and to give a “local flavor” to the campaign. It is also important to maintain good local relations. When the campaign is over, the national group is gone, but you still need coverage of your local events.