

ASIAN AMERICAN JOURNALISTS ASSOCIATION
TEXAS CHAPTER
<http://chapters.aaja.org/Texas/>

Part of AAJA's mission is to promote community access to news organizations and encourage accurate news coverage of Asian Americans and others.

Getting into the newspaper or onto radio or television isn't easy. News outlets can receive hundreds of thousands of pitches every day, across the wires, over the phone, via fax and email, through the regular mail, even from people who walk in our doors.

How can you improve your chances of getting into the newspaper, or onto radio or TV? Step No. 1: Tell us about it.

Try viewing your campaign to get into the paper or on TV or radio as a climb up a ladder. The bottom rung is easy. The top one isn't as difficult as you might think. It's relatively easy to step up one rung in pitching your story to any news organization. Most groups stop there, satisfied with getting a notice of their upcoming meeting published in the community calendar. But in many cases, you might be able to move well beyond that first rung, with a little bit of effort and thinking. What's the top rung? Maybe a story on the front page of the paper, or a spot on the nightly newscast.

If you're planning a Chinese New Year celebration, the minority affairs reporter at your local newspaper might be interested in the event. The entertainment section might be able to run short blurbs in its calendar. Coordinate your publicity effort with other groups in the community that are planning similar events, and the paper might decide to publish a calendar specifically about upcoming Chinese New Year celebrations, or write a story about them. If your event will draw a lot of people, the paper might come out and do a story about it, complete with pictures. Good stories and good pictures usually equal good play. The story could become the centerpiece on the front page of the paper, or on the front page of the second section. Local TV and radio stations might also be interested, given the sensory aspects of the story: giggling children, the color and drumbeat of a lion dance.

Your local news organizations might also be interested in your event beyond viewing it as a news story. We might be interested in buying a sponsorship, which would help increase your organization's exposure dramatically.

Bottom line: Don't be afraid to ask for coverage and propose specific ideas.

KNOW YOUR LOCAL MEDIA

1. Most people want their story covered in the major metropolitan daily newspapers or on network radio and TV. But because those outlets generally cater to large general audiences, your story may have a better chance of getting coverage in a smaller community print or broadcast outlet, the ethnic media, or in, say, a targeted section of a major newspaper. Major metro newspapers, for example, increasingly are creating publications that are targeted at specific demographic groups: geographic, ethnic, young people, commuters, and so on.
2. Read, watch and study as many news outlets as possible, and try to get a feel for what makes news at each one.
3. Look for entry points. Does your local newspaper have beat reporters who have covered your organization, or ones similar to it? Does it have columnists who write about topics that your group cares about? Does the paper have standing features, such as community calendars or picture pages that focus on community events? Does it accept guest columns? And, who's in charge? At a

big paper, the editor who can run a blurb about your event in the entertainment calendar is probably different than the one who can assign a story about it in the metro section of the newspaper.

4. At a minimum, you should be able to get your event listed in the community calendar. These can be published in the metro, sports, entertainment or business sections, and include listings of fundraising events, fairs, lectures, films, seminars, workshops, dances, concerts, and meetings of general interest.
5. Decide which vehicles are best. If your group is providing a valuable public service, such as free health care for the elderly, a public service announcement on local radio and TV might be best. Or you may offer yourself up as a guest on a talk show or as a guest editorial writer.

MAKE YOUR PITCH STAND OUT

1. Make it local. This sounds obvious, but virtually all news organizations are intensively local in their focus. If you're promoting an event and just starting out, try writing a short news release or pitch letter and emailing it or faxing it to your local media outlets. Make sure your pitch, starting with the subject line on your email or headline on your fax, focuses on what's happening locally. News organizations in Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, Fort Worth and Austin, for example, are unlikely to assign staff to stories that have nothing to do with their cities or the state. And even if your idea is local, the newspaper or TV station might overlook it if the subject line or headline doesn't state this specifically. Example of a good headline to a news outlet in the Lone Star State: "Texans aid tsunami victims."
2. Focus on what's new and important, get to the point, and keep it short. Focus on what's fresh, trendy, unusual, contrarian, and of significance to the broadest numbers of people. News organizations also love stories that arouse deep emotions – love, sympathy, hate, fear, anger – that people can identify with. Don't start a release with a dissertation about your organization. Do start it with the news.
3. Horn in on the big story. When the tsunami hit, scores of non-profits, corporations and individuals pitched in. Newspapers and TV stations ran stories about local and national fund drives and published or aired lists of groups that were conducting them. We did stories about Girl Scouts who sold cookies to benefit the fund drives. Business editors assigned reporters to do stories about corporations that matched employee contributions. Bottom line: News organizations developed many of these stories off of news releases issued by the non-profits, corporations, and others involved.
4. Put as much detail in your pitch as possible. If you're conducting a non-profit event, for example, include at least the following in your news release: time, date, place, cost of admission, how to buy tickets and contact your organization, deadlines for purchasing tickets, who the event is benefiting, what the proceeds will be used for, how much you want to raise, and what's going to happen at the event. If you have arranged for a prominent speaker, or there's anything else that's remarkable about the event, such as entertainment, mention that prominently. If you think your local news organizations would be interested in interviewing your speaker, you should set aside time in the agenda for media availability. Follow that up with a call to the news organization, offering time with the speaker. See more later for tips on writing news releases.
5. Think with your senses. Again, good stories and good "art" (pictures and graphics) make for good play. Pictures and sound are particularly important if you're trying to get your story on TV or radio. If there's anything that's particularly visual about your story, include that in your pitch and be ready to help news organizations arrange what's necessary. If your church is preparing holiday dinner at a homeless shelter, for example, offer to allow photographers into the kitchen and dining room.
6. Send art with the release. If your release quotes somebody extensively, include a picture of that person. If sending it electronically, call ahead to the news outlet to find out how the picture should be formatted. Another option: Instead of sending photos or graphics, you can include a link to your organization's web site. Make sure the art can be reproduced in large enough size.
7. Schedule a news conference. If you think your news will generate significant media attention, or warrants significant attention, schedule a news conference.

8. Address your pitch to a specific reporter or editor. If you're unsure, call the news outlet, explain the story, and ask for the names of who you should direct your pitches to. Additionally, the web sites of most news outlets include names and titles of key editors. If you're still unsure, address your pitch to "City editor," if sending it to a newspaper, or "News director" or "Assignment editor" at TV or radio stations. If you know your story is of interest to a specific specialty department, such as business, entertainment or sports, you should direct your story pitch to those editors and reporters. You can also use local media guides for your research; availability depends on your market.
9. How to send it. If you're looking for immediate attention, send it via email or fax and follow up with a phone call.
10. Give us time to get there. If you're holding a news conference, give us one or two days notice, if possible. Weekday mornings are best. The later in the day, the more pressing the deadlines. Nighttime events make it difficult for newspaper reporters to meet deadlines for the next day's paper. However, if your event is visual, such as a public demonstration, consider holding it in the evening when local TV news is airing, so the event can be carried live. In general, in any news organization, staffing is light on weekends, making it difficult to cover anything but the most pressing and interesting stories.
11. Be ready. If you issue a news release, you or somebody else in your organization should be readily available to answer calls from the news media about it, particularly if you believe the news is strong enough to merit immediate daily coverage. If your event requires a ticket for admission, be ready to sell tickets once you put out your news release. If your event is a speech, have copies of it for reporters. If you are publicizing a service, be ready to respond to demand for it. If you are calling attention to your controversial stand on an issue, be prepared to deal with opposition. Good reporters will present opposing viewpoints on any controversial topic. If television news is interested, make sure you have an articulate, succinct spokesperson. Time allotted for live interviews is typically less than two minutes, and there's no chance to do it over again.
12. Avoid big news days. Unless you're trying to horn in on the big story, choose another day, if possible, to make your pitch.
13. If your event is sponsored by a newspaper or TV or radio station, other media outlets might not want to cover it.
14. Forge relationships with editors and reporters. This can be particularly fruitful if your organization has an ongoing need to be in the newspaper or on TV. At the newspaper, call up the beat reporter who covers your organization, and offer to meet for coffee or lunch. If there is no beat reporter, call the city editor and offer the same. At the TV station, call up the assignment editor and offer to stop by for a meeting. Often, television people don't have time to leave the station for meetings.
15. Be persistent and follow up. Remember, news organizations can receive thousands of pitches every day. It's okay to follow up your pitch with a call to see if the editor or reporter received it, and to press your case. Don't be discouraged or argumentative if your idea doesn't fly. Your local newspaper and TV station might turn it down today simply because the staff's time is taken up by other assignments. Stay persistent. Be positive. Look for more ways to pitch your organization to the news media.

CALLING IN STORY IDEAS

1. Make sure your story is one of major importance or interest that can't be handled through a news release alone. Remember, reporters and editors receive hundreds of pitches a day.
2. Send in a release first. Then, pick the right time to call. Newspapers and TV stations typically have news meetings in the mornings and mid-afternoon, say, around 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. or 3 p.m. Try to avoid those times, particularly if you're calling about a story that isn't "breaking" that day. Also, the later in the day at a newspaper, the more likely it is the editors and reporters will be on deadline and will have less time to talk. At TV stations, reporters don't like to answer calls on non-breaking stories within an hour and a half before newscasts.
3. Be prepared to demonstrate why your story is newsworthy.

4. Find out which reporter or editor is most likely to cover the story. This is the person you should call. If the reporter or editor thinks the idea is good but she can't cover it, she will probably pass it to a colleague who can.
5. If your story isn't "breaking" – that is, is not happening within hours of your call – then write a letter, email, or release to the reporter or editor first. It's much easier to sell an idea in writing, and much easier for a reporter or editor to evaluate it.
6. Practice 30 or 45-second pitches before you call. When you call, get to the point. If leaving a voice mail message for an editor or reporter, give your name and return phone number first, then leave a succinct summary of why you're calling. This ensures that the reporter has your contact information.

TIPS ON BEING INTERVIEWED

1. If the interview is scheduled for several hours or days later, ask the reporter what the story's about, what questions she might ask you, and how detailed you will have to be in your responses. This will help you prepare.
2. Do your homework. Prepare evidence and examples
3. In the interview, state your key points first. Be concise.
4. To increase your chances of being quoted, talk in colorful language. Use bold, short, catchy statements. Cite interesting examples involving real people. Engage in a conversation with the reporter.
5. Honesty is the best policy. If you don't know an answer, say so, and volunteer to find the answer for the reporter. Vague answers increase the likelihood that the story will be imprecise and possibly inaccurate.
6. Don't assume the reporter knows anything about the topic. Restate key points for emphasis. If you're not sure the reporter understands the key points, say so. Volunteer important information that the reporter hasn't asked about.
7. If the interview is on TV, look at the reporter, not at the camera. Before you sit down for your interview, check to see that your hair is neat, your face is not shiny, and your jacket, shirt and necktie don't have small patterns that will look bad on air.

CONTROLLING THE STORY: ASK FOR AN EDITORIAL BOARD MEETING

Have a big story to tell, and want some control over when it will be published?

Seek a meeting with the editorial board of your local newspaper. This may or may not be difficult, depending on traditional practices in your market.

In some markets, you can ask for a meeting with the editorial board. In smaller markets, the publisher might run the board. In larger markets, the board might be managed by a senior news executive who reports to the publisher. Usually, the people who run the editorial page do not report to the editors who run the newsroom.

If the board agrees to a meeting, you might be able to negotiate an "embargo" date – the time at which the newspaper can publish the information, or even conduct independent reporting based on it – in exchange for access to the information and your organization's executives during the meeting. The newspaper's editorial writers and the reporters and editors who cover your organization will likely be in attendance.

What's the upside for you? It enables you to control the flow of information, assuming there are no leaks.

What's the downside for you? The more people who know the information, the more likely it is that the story will leak to a competing news organization that isn't bound by your embargo. News organizations are less likely to agree to an embargo with your organization if you've been unable to prevent leaks on previously negotiated agreements. And because you've given the news organization more time to research the story, it's possible the resulting coverage could be more critical.

You can also try and negotiate an embargo with specific reporters and editors without seeking an editorial board meeting.

On any offer of an embargo, reporters and editors will weigh several factors, including: the value of the information and access, the need to publish it immediately, the possibility of getting the information from other sources, the likelihood that the story will leak to competing news organizations, and the credibility of the organization that's offering the information.

Many news organizations won't accept embargoes, out of fear of having their news content controlled by sources.

But many news organizations will accept an embargo, believing advance notice of the news will allow them to organize a more complete report.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

These are by far the quickest, easiest and most widely used method for ordinary citizens to get their ideas published. Most newspapers, including the large metropolitan dailies, are quite eager to publish them, particularly because readership studies indicate they are very popular with readers.

Here are some tips for writing letters:

1. Include your name, address and phone number, because few papers will run anonymous letters.
2. Keep your letter short and to the point.
3. Make your letter newsworthy. It can be on any topic that's of interest to readers; it doesn't have to be in response to a story the paper has just run.
4. A catchy, humorous letter can be more effective and more likely to run than a straight, dry one.
5. Stick to the facts and the issues, and avoid personal attacks.
6. If you're responding to something the paper has just published, write promptly to increase the chances your letter will be published.
7. Avoid sending the same letter to more than one publication. Opinion pages editors are less likely to run letters that have already appeared in other publications.
8. Check your paper's opinions page for the proper way to address letters and send them.

PSAs: FREE ADVERTISING FOR NON-PROFITS

Most television and radio stations offer public service announcements at no cost to non-profit organizations. They are commonly referred to as PSAs. PSAs are scheduled in commercial inventory and typically are 10, 20, 30 and 60 seconds in length.

If you are producing your own public service announcement, it is best to contact the station you are interested in and ask them for their public service announcement policy prior to producing your spot. The contact is usually the community affairs or community relations director. Policies vary between stations and typically vary between radio and television. Most PSA policies are located on the station's web site.

Screening: All public announcements will be screened by the station prior to being placed into the rotation.

Quality: Each spot aired must be produced to conform to commercial television broadcast standards. Subject matter must be presented in good taste. Public service announcements must address issues of local concern or promote causes that will enhance the quality of life in the community.

Public service announcements are only available for organizations that are tax-exempt. It is wise to provide proof of your organization's tax-exempt status when submitting the PSA.

Most television stations accept public service announcements on DVC PRO and Beta SP broadcast videotape. However, some use DVD and other formats, so it is best to contact the station before producing your PSA and find out what format is best for submission. If more than one public announcement is being submitted for airing, put all versions on one tape.

Once you qualify, plan to submit your script or tape at least 60 days prior to the first day you would like it to be broadcast. Keep in mind that the sooner the station receives the information, the better chance it has of getting on the air. Also, regarding radio, allow extra time in case the station may want to make corrections or offer suggestions for improvement of the material submitted.

As a general rule, copy should consist of 10, 20, 30, and 60-second spots. Again, check with the station prior to producing your spot to make sure they air the length you are producing.

When producing, include key facts about your program or activity. Keep sentences brief, clear, factual, and conversational. Check your announcement by reading it aloud, with a stopwatch. Never go over the allowed time. The content of the spot can be creative. Be sure to include who, what, when, where and why.

Here's a sample 20-second announcement for AAJA:

“Learn about the news media and how to gain access to it. Attend ‘Making Headlines,’ Saturday March 22 at Sacramento City College, Room M-3. The workshop will include a panel discussion led by Sacramento area journalists. For more information, call the Asian American Journalists Association at 555-5555.”

Beware of turning your public service announcement into a commercial. For example, do not mention commercial, for-profit companies in video or audio unless approved by the station. Again, your best course of action is to find out the PSA policy prior to producing your spot. Most stations will include their PSA policy on their web sites.

If you are interested in a station producing your public service announcement and sponsoring your event, contact the station at least two–six months prior to your event with your proposal.

SPONSORSHIPS

Another way to expand your message is to try and seek sponsorship for your organization from local media outlets. Sponsorships can bring free advertising and a big boost in credibility that comes with being backed by the local paper or TV or radio station.

First, do your research.

What kind of organizations do your local news outlets sponsor? This obviously varies by market. Broad categories can include civic, educational, health and human services, arts and cultural, religious, social, and environmental. Newspaper and television probably won't sponsor an event that already has a competing print media sponsor. And news outlets might shy away from sponsoring organizations that have controversial agendas.

Does it matter whether your group reaches a lot of people?

Not necessarily.

We're certainly interested in sponsoring groups or events that allow us to reach a large number of potential subscribers and viewers. But even if your event doesn't reach a lot of people, we might be interested for other reasons. If your organization reaches minorities, for example, backing it might help the news outlet fulfill its goal of fostering diversity. If you have a small struggling arts organization and your local paper likes to back the arts, you might get the news organization to help.

It might also help your cause if the news outlet has employees who use your product or service. Perhaps more importantly, it can help if high-ranking executives at the local news outlet are personally interested in your cause. If the publisher of your paper is diabetic, for example, that may increase the likelihood that she will be interested in having the newspaper back diabetes research.

Now, start looking for the people who dole out sponsorships at your news outlet.

At a small paper, the publisher might hold the strings. At a large newspaper, multiple executives might have control. The marketing director might be responsible for sponsorships broadly, but a vice president might control a pot of cash that he can use to buy tickets to a non-profit dinner. In any case, it's not likely that the editors and reporters have any control over sponsorships. In television, it will probably be the community affairs department that has control of on-air and cash sponsorships.

This information might be available on your news outlet's web site. Or, you might have to call or send an email.

When you find out who controls sponsorships, get information on deadlines and application procedures. Now you're ready to make your pitch.

Start with a simple letter that quickly introduces yourself, your organization, what it does and who it benefits, and what you want from a sponsorship. Make sure you detail how many people your group benefits with its programs, particularly ones who live in the circulation area of the newspaper or service area of the television station. If you already have a fact sheet about your organization, include it in your pitch. Also include a copy of your non-profit 501(c)(3) letter. If your news outlet requires an application form, get a copy of it and include that with your package.

Then, mail, email, or fax it to the people in charge of sponsorships at your news outlet. It's okay to follow that up with a phone call.

Here are some things you should be prepared to offer if you're seeking, say, sponsorship for your charity dinner:

1. Exclusive print or TV sponsorship. Most newspapers, for example, won't want to sponsor an event if a rival paper or magazine is already a sponsor. The same goes for TV stations.
2. A table at the dinner.
3. Banner signage at the dinner.
4. The news organization's logo on programs and other giveaways, or even a free advertisement in the program.
5. A booth or exhibit space at the event, if that's appropriate.
6. The opportunity to distribute newspapers or sign up subscribers at the event, if appropriate.
7. First right of refusal for next year's sponsorship.
8. If your organization wants sponsorship for multiple events in, say, one year, submit a request that offers yearlong benefits. Or, ask the news outlet to sponsor only the largest of the events.

Here's what you can seek from the news organization: Free advertising space or airtime. Many news outlets prefer space or airtime over cash.

Even if you want cash, don't sniff at free advertising. The space or time carries a big cash value, and your organization should get a big boost in visibility and credibility from having the backing of the news outlet and space or time for advertising. Other sponsors may be more likely to sign up with your group if you have a media sponsorship.

You'll also have the opportunity to help design the advertising that the paper runs to promote your group or its event.

You can use the ad to thank other sponsors. You can design it as a discount coupon. You can even use it as an entry in a contest your group is running.

Other tips to consider when approaching a news outlet for sponsorship:

1. You might get a heftier sponsorship if your organization is already a paying advertiser or offers to pay for some advertising. You might even get a discount on that paid advertising.
2. If your organization owes money to the news outlet for past advertising, that's likely an obstacle in asking for a sponsorship.
3. You shouldn't expect multi-year sponsorship agreements. News outlets are wary of these. Such agreements can frustrate the news outlet's own advertising representatives, who may be trying to sell ads to the non-profit group. A stable organization this year can become unstable over a lengthy sponsorship, leaving a news organization vulnerable. News organizations, like most givers, might be interested in nurturing your group along for a short time, but not for several years. And news organizations, like most givers, might want to see the results of its sponsorship over a year before agreeing to another one.
4. Be aware of budget cycles at the news outlet you're pitching. If you need a sponsorship for next year, make your pitch, say, in August, when the news outlet is beginning its budget process for the next year. This is particularly important if you're asking for cash.
5. Don't be discouraged. Like ideas for news stories, news outlets can get hundreds of annual requests for sponsorships. If yours doesn't fly the first time, try again.