

Contacting local media: how to write a press release

Approaching the Media is a great way to raise awareness about VSO and your fundraising activities. Journalists are always on the lookout for good stories. Before you make the first phone call, here are some pointers:

- **Identify journalists who might be interested in your story**
Cold calling the newsroom of your daily paper will probably only end in frustration. Find out the names of reporters who cover similar types of stories to yours and contact them directly.
- **Does your local daily newspaper have a human interest or travel section?**
Is there a reporter in your community with an interest in international development? Has your placement country been in the news lately? If so, which reporter has been covering the story?
- **What do you want to say?**
Journalists from regional and local papers want to know what's happening in their area. Let them know about your fundraising activities and when they are happening. Tell them why you are raising money, how much you hope to raise and that you need public support. Usually the journalist will ask for this information in a press release. Take a camera to fundraising events, as photos are a great way to get your message across in the media.
- **Keep it regional; keep us informed**
We need all the coverage we can get. However, coverage in national media needs to be well coordinated and often involves harder or more controversial issues. Our press office is in constant negotiations with national journalists, so please talk to us before making any direct approaches. In any event, please keep us up to date. If you are getting great results, it's helpful for us to be able to pass on best practice to other fundraisers.

Writing a press release

There is a standard format for press releases. Journalists working to deadlines will do little more than skim through your copy, so presenting the information in an accessible way can help get your message across. Local or tabloid newspapers use the same format, again and again. Here's how to do it:

- Get the 5 Ws (who, what, when, why, and where) into the first paragraph.
- Your first sentences should grab the reader's attention. The 'why' may take a bit longer, but still be brief – you can expand later on.
- Type your release on single-sided sheets.
- Keep it simple: use short words, short sentences and short paragraphs.
- Editors cut press releases from the bottom up, so don't leave your key message until the last paragraph!
- Stick to the facts and use lively quotes to give opinions or add colour to your piece.
- Assume whoever is reading your release knows nothing about you or VSO.
- Explain everything and spell out all abbreviations.
- When you're happy with the copy, write a short, simple heading for the release.
- Type it in bold, centered capitals so it stands out, and add the date at the top.
- If you are looking for sponsorship, include a telephone number and email address where readers can contact you, or give the VSO website: www.vso.org.uk
- Type 'continues' at the bottom of all but the last sheet. Type 'ends' at the end of the press release to make clear that anything that follows is an editor's note, background information etc.
- Add a 'note for editors' if necessary. You can give details of special interest in event and background information that might be useful. If your event provides a photo opportunity, give details here.
- Include a contact name and phone number for more information.