



# **Inside Oversight: Levin Center at Wayne Law Tutorials**

## **SERIES 3 HOLDING A HEARING**

### **Tutorial: Encouraging Media Coverage Before a Hearing**

In this video, a Levin Center expert offers tips on how to encourage good media coverage of an oversight hearing before the hearing takes place.

#### **Instructor**

Kathy Gest, press secretary to former U.S. Senator William S. Cohen, former chair and ranking Republican member of the Governmental Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management

#### **Transcript**

Kathy: Hello, I'm Kathy Gest, and I'm here to talk with you today about how to get good media attention for oversight hearings, and why that's important. I spent a decade working in the U.S. Senate as the press secretary for Senator Bill Cohen of Maine who at different times served as chairman or ranking Republican member of the Governmental Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management.

This tutorial deals with what to do in advance of a hearing to help promote good media coverage. The next one talks about what to do during and after the hearing.

The media is important to your ultimate goal of calling attention to how government programs are managed and carried out. A hearing might highlight good management practices that can be applied to improve or strengthen other programs. Or, a hearing can expose shortcomings in the management of a

government program that can lead to administrative or legislative changes to fix the problem.

Having the media report on these findings can help mobilize support for the outcome you are seeking among important audiences, such as Members of Congress who might need to pass corrective legislation, Executive Branch agencies that might need to change procedures for administering the program, interested constituency groups, and the general public. The more these groups hear about the problem, the more likely they are to take action. Media attention can increase transparency in government activities and boost accountability.

Here are some tips on how communications advisors can play a role in getting ready for a hearing.

### **Focus on witness preparation**

Tip Number One: Focus on witness preparation. Television, print, and online journalists tend to look for good visuals to enhance their stories, so finding articulate, photogenic witnesses with a good story to tell can go a long way toward increasing good press coverage.

While it's not the responsibility of the communications advisor to determine witnesses, the press staff can offer advice on deciding among witnesses or advising on how a witness is presented. The press advisor might also assist in decisions about how the witness's story is told for maximum impact.

The most interesting stories tend to be those that have a personal element, such as an elderly woman talking about the sacrifices she made to pay for costly prescription drugs or someone relating how he or she lost money because of a scam. The testimony of expert witnesses can also be interesting by encouraging them to avoid bureaucratic language and quantifying facts and figures in easily digestible sound bites. The communications advisor can help prepare these witnesses for maximum visual impact.

### **Develop good media lists**

Tip Number Two: Prepare a list of the media you want to cover the hearing. The list should include representatives of print, broadcast, and online news outlets with their email addresses and telephone numbers. The list should contain not just the obvious outlets, such as those in Washington if the hearing is on Capitol Hill. You should also include any that might have a special interest in the subject matter, whether they're in town or not, as well as outlets that would be interested in

particular witnesses. The list should include the witnesses' hometown newspapers, radio, and television stations. Also include outlets representing the home states of the lawmakers who will take part in the hearing. The list should include not just reporters, but also editors, editorial page editors, and columnists – anyone who might be inclined to write about the subject.

### **Create good materials**

Tip Number Three: Help the press tell the story by creating good materials. These should include:

- A press release announcing the hearing that lists the time and place, the witnesses, and background on the subject matter. Be sure to specify whom to contact for more information. It should be sent out a week to 10 days in advance of the hearing, then resent once or twice, but definitely the day before the hearing.
- Also send a media advisory, similar to the press release but shorter in a bulleted in a who, what, where, when, why format, listing the hearing particulars. This should go to daybooks and other services that list hearing schedules.
- Prepare fact sheets on the individual witnesses giving their background and particular expertise. If they are willing to talk to the press, include their contact information so reporters can get in touch with them, but be sure to clear it with them in advance.
- Prepare a fact sheet on the hearing subject going into more detail than the press release. It should include the committee's thinking in deciding to look into the issue, background on the issue being examined, studies the committee might have done, and anything else that the committee would like reporters to know that could figure into their stories.
- Useful graphics might include charts or pictures that illustrate the problem that is the subject of the hearing. These graphics might be displayed around the hearing room, providing visuals that the media can use to illustrate their stories. Take-away copies of the graphics should be available to the reporters in both paper and electronic versions.

- Props may be appropriate if the hearing deals with something that can be visualized like faulty equipment or counterfeit goods. Examples can help illustrate the problems under discussion. They also provide more visuals that journalists can use to bolster their stories.

All of these materials should be posted on the committee's website, but not all at the same time. In advance of the hearing, limit what you post to notices and press releases about the hearing and the biographical information on witnesses.

### **Engage the media**

Tip Number Four: Engage the media. Sending out press releases can begin the media outreach process, but often more concentrated efforts are needed to make sure the desired reporters are in the room.

Most issues have key journalists who have been covering them for a long time. Contact those reporters individually to brief them on what's going to happen at the hearing. Send them briefing materials in advance, and offer them interviews with key figures. While you don't want to pre-empt the news that the hearing will make, an advance story by a respected reporter or publication can help generate interest and get more journalists to cover the hearing.

Sometimes, particularly for large media outlets, it may not be easy to find the reporter who will give the story the best presentation. You may need to make a lot of calls, but it's worth the effort. For one hearing I talked to six or seven people at the New York Times before finding one who was thrilled with the subject matter and flew in from out of town to cover the hearing.

A day or two before the hearing, it is a good idea to phone and send an email reminder to all of the outlets on the media list to give them a push to attend. The person doing the phoning may not talk to any real people, but voicemail messages should be left.

### **Use social media**

Tip number five: Use social media – particularly Facebook and Twitter – to get out information about the hearing.

Many congressional committees and subcommittees have Facebook pages on which they post information about the panel's members, activities, reports, and other information. If you are planning a hearing, do a Facebook post with all of the information you would put in a press release – date, time, location, names of

witnesses, and a synopsis of what the hearing is about – and then provide a link back to the committee’s website. If the committee doesn’t have a Facebook page, it would be a good idea to create one.

You should post the same information on Twitter, also with a link. Many reporters use Twitter as a news tip sheet, so that might be the first place they see information about a hearing. Using or developing hashtags (#s) for the committee, the subject matter and potentially the witnesses or committee members will help ensure that the information is seen by interested audiences.

I hope these tips will help as you make preparations for a hearing with the goal of getting good media coverage.

### **Good Media Practices Before a Hearing**

- 1. Focus on witness preparation.**
- 2. Develop good media lists.**
- 3. Create good materials.**
- 4. Engage the media.**
- 5. Use social media.**

Kathy: Thanks for listening.

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